

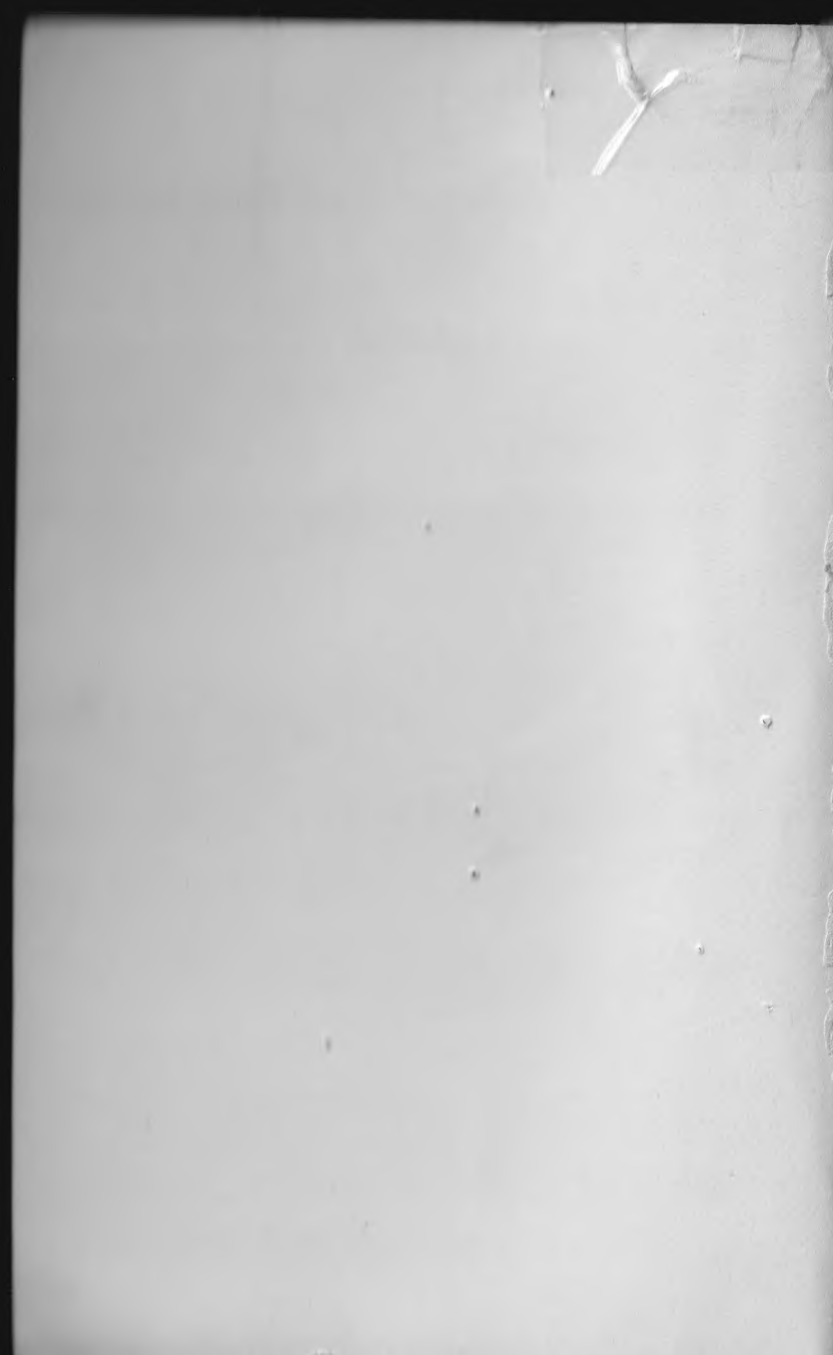


FUTURA 

HOSTAGE

**A New Avengers novel by
PETER CAVE**





THE NEW AVENGERS 6:
HOSTAGE

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Peter Cave

The New Avengers 6: Hostage

Based on an original Script by
Brian Clemens

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PROLOGUE

Steed entered his drawing room proudly, adjusting the lapels of his jacket. He was rigged out in full Diplomatic attire, complete with Sash and Order.

Purdey glanced up at him with undisguised admiration. 'Very smart, Steed,' she murmured appreciatively.

'Thank you, Purdey,' Steed said with a smile. He crossed to his bureau, sliding open a drawer and pulling out a small black leather box. Opening it, he withdrew a small, well-polished medal and pinned it into place as a finishing touch.

'What's that one for,' Gambit asked, grinning. 'Utter ruthlessness in the field?'

Steed smiled back, shaking his head. 'Dedication to duty,' he answered.

Gambit shrugged. 'It amounts to more or less the same thing where you are concerned, doesn't it? If you had to make a choice between fulfilling your duty and selling your grandmother to white slave traders, I'm more than willing to bet it would be a case of "bye bye granny". And not even a wave farewell.'

Steed smiled good-naturedly. 'There's only one way to play the game, Gambit. Strictly by the rules.'

Gambit scoffed. 'Come off it, Steed. You are the one man who breaks the rules faster and more frequently than anyone else.'

'Ah, but not *that* rule,' Steed countered. 'Never that rule.'

Purdey smiled quietly to herself. 'I wonder, Steed,' she mused, under her breath.

Steed didn't hear her. He picked his topcoat off the back

of a chair, draping it over his arm. 'Well, I suppose we'd better not keep the ambassador waiting.'

Gambit and Purdey stood to join him.

'Off to the banquet, then,' Purdey said brightly.

'More like the feast before the slaughter,' Gambit muttered, rather cynically.

Both Steed and Purdey glanced at him curiously.

'Well, isn't it?' Gambit asked, expanding his theme. 'This ceremonial banquet is rather ill-timed, if you ask me. Tonight we all go out with beaming smiles and radiate bonhomie to all and sundry. First thing tomorrow, and we are going to be at each other's throats.'

Steed nodded thoughtfully, his smile fading into a slight frown. 'Yes, there's no denying that the next few days will be rough,' he admitted.

The admission served to release the pent-up gloom which each of the trio had been keeping back, hidden behind a facade of casual cheeriness. Tonight's gathering would be heavily overshadowed by what was to come. In the morning, the trio would no longer share their sense of comradeship. They would not have the crutch of friendship and mutual trust to fall back upon. Each of the three would be alone, isolated and unsure of their ground.

Steed had admitted that things might get rough. It was an understatement. Each one of them would be subjected to intense pressures, both emotional and physical. Their bodies and minds would be pushed . . . to the limit and then beyond.

CHAPTER ONE

A lot had happened in three days. A lot of confusing, worrying things. Gambit was tense, his nerves stretched out like piano wires, forced to play a discordant concerto inside his head. Physically, he was equally battered. His body ached in every muscle, and the torture was still not yet over. There was more to come, for the final confrontation had still to be faced.

Gambit loped along the security corridor, passing at least half a dozen stiff-backed guards, each one sporting a Stirling sub-machine gun in a strictly businesslike manner. The atmosphere of absolute and total high-security was so powerful that it was almost overpowering. There was also the constant sense of danger, and knife-edged tension to contend with, for there was absolutely no leeway for a mistake, or a single slip-up. One false move, a forgotten rule, and there would be no warnings . . . only a hail of bullets. Under the conditions which prevailed in the top-security establishment, any mistake brought immediate retribution. There was no other way it could have been.

Gambit came to a stop outside a heavy steel door, flashing the security pass pinned to his lapel under the nose of the guard who stood beside it. Given leave to pass, Gambit tapped lightly on the door with his knuckles, then stepped in without waiting for confirmation.

Paul Spelman looked up from his desk, his face grim. 'Hello, Gambit. I expect McKay has briefed you?' he said, in a brisk, businesslike manner.

Gambit nodded stiffly. 'Steed sabotaged the central computer system, or so I'm told.'

'It was unforgivable. Therefore, we do not forgive,'

Spelman said, simply. 'Now, you realise why you have to go through with this?'

Gambit shook his head. 'No, quite frankly, I don't. Dammit, man . . . there ought to be room for reasonable doubt, a little consideration for years of trust.'

Spelman let out a short, bitter snort of disgust. 'Trust, Gambit? How can you trust a man who has betrayed everything he and his country hold to be inviolate? How can you even allow doubt when that man would kill you without a qualm? The very essence of our Department is absolute and utter security . . . against any enemy. That sort of security can only be bought at a price, Gambit. It is an expensive price, but one we have no choice but to pay. It is kill or be killed, strike first and without question.'

'Steed could have been framed,' Gambit muttered defensively.

Spelman shook his head firmly. 'You have my assurance, and that of Tom McKay, that we have fully investigated that possibility. There is no doubt at all . . . Steed is guilty, he must be made to pay the price.'

Gambit looked far from convinced. Indeed, he was positively miserable. 'What you are asking me to do is a betrayal . . . the worst possible kind,' he complained bitterly.

Spelman shook his head. 'Not asking, Gambit . . . ordering,' he corrected firmly. 'And you'd better have your loyalties in the right order.'

Sighing heavily, Gambit slid his automatic from its shoulder holster, snapped off the safety and checked the fresh clip. 'I still think this whole sordid business stinks,' he muttered.

'We're in a pretty stinking business,' Spelman observed, calmly. 'If we wanted to be in a nice, pleasant job, we would all have joined another branch of the civil service . . . or become advertising executives.' He broke off to glance

at his watch, then looked briefly up at Gambit. 'You know what you have to do?'

'My duty,' Gambit said flatly, avoiding irony.

'Correct,' Spelman murmured, a slightly self-satisfied smile playing about his lips. He nodded towards the door of the small office. 'Any minute now, John Steed is going to come in through that door. He is a traitor. You have been ordered to kill him.'

A terrible silence fell upon the room. Gambit cradled the gun in his right palm, which was becoming moist and sticky with perspiration. Several seconds passed, the tension rising sharply towards fever pitch.

There was a light rap on the door. Gambit stiffened, the hairs on the back of his neck prickling. In a hoarse whisper, he answered, 'Yes?'

'Gambit?' called Steed's voice from the corridor outside. He sounded nervy, uncertain.

'Yes Steed. I'm in here.'

The door handle began to turn, very slowly. Steed spoke again. 'Look Mike . . . what they've told you . . . it's all lies, I swear it. You know I could never be a traitor, Mike. We're friends . . . you know me, you trust me. I swear to you Mike . . . I am innocent.'

The door sighed open a couple of inches. Gambit's grip on his automatic tightened, his finger curling around the trigger.

Steed spoke again. 'I'm coming in, Mike. We have to talk this thing over. As friends, Mike . . . trusted colleagues.'

The door flew fully open, suddenly. The figure of John Steed was silhouetted in the portal. He held a gun in his hand.

Gambit brought up his own automatic in a two-handed grip. Without apparent hesitation, he squeezed off a single shot. The figure of Steed fell back through the doorway,

slammed by the tearing impact of the slug. It fell flat upon the floor, laying there unmoving.

'Excellent,' Spelman muttered, moving towards Steed's prone figure. He bent over it. After a second or so, he straightened, turning on Gambit angrily. 'You were ordered to kill him,' he blazed accusingly. 'You shot him through the shoulder.'

Gambit grinned broadly. 'Wanted to take him alive . . . for questioning.'

Spelman let out a snort of exasperation, bending over to lift the life-sized dummy of John Steed back into a standing position. There was a neat hole drilled in the dummy's right-hand shoulder.

'That mistake could have cost you your life,' Spelman said. 'He could have shot you.'

'With a shattered right shoulder? Highly unlikely,' Gambit countered. 'This way . . . we have Steed alive, helpless . . . and in a position to give him a fair trial.'

'Those were not your orders,' Spelman reminded him coldly.

'So I believe in being flexible,' Gambit shrugged his shoulders somewhat carelessly.

Spelman flashed him a scathing glance. 'Alright, Gambit . . . you're dismissed,' he snapped curtly. 'This will go on your report, I hope you realise that? I shall personally add my opinion that you're getting a little sloppy.'

Gambit shrugged again. 'Please yourself,' he muttered. He turned, and began walking towards the other door in Spelman's office. Just before he reached it he spun, suddenly, on the balls of his feet. 'Look out,' he screamed at Spelman, clawing at his shoulder holster at the same time.

Spelman threw himself to the floor as Gambit drew and fired twice. Gambit grinned, re-holstered his gun and

stepped slowly over the man's prone body to where the dummy of Steed had been knocked to the ground for the second time. He lifted it just as Spelman was crawling to his feet and starting to dust himself down.

'Sloppy?' Gambit asked sarcastically, turning to leave.

Spelman glared at the dummy, with two holes dead between the eyes. In fury, he whirled on Gambit, but he had already left the room, chuckling gently to himself.

Through the adjoining door, in the next office, a man in a white coat awaited him. He stood up as Gambit approached his desk, offering his hand for a perfunctory handshake. 'Mr. Gambit,' he murmured politely.

'Doctor Evans,' Gambit responded, releasing the man's hand.

'Please sit down, Mr. Gambit,' Evans murmured, gesturing to an empty chair. He waited until Gambit was settled comfortably before going on. 'I am just going to give you some simple word-association tests,' he said quietly. 'I shall say something, and I want you to speak the first word which comes into your mind. Do you understand?'

Gambit nodded.

'Good,' Evans said with satisfaction.

'God, said the Duchess, I think I'm pregnant,' Gambit delivered, with a straight face.

Evans regarded him coldly. 'Will you please take this seriously, Gambit?' he muttered. 'Now, first word coming up . . . Security.'

'Absolute,' Gambit snapped back at once. The word had been drummed into his subconscious as indelibly as a post-hypnotic command over the past few days.

Evans looked pleased. 'Discipline,' he said.

'Strict.'

'Traitor?'

'Liquidate,' Gambit hissed spontaneously.

Doctor Evans nodded to himself and scribbled a comment on the jotter in front of him. 'Steed,' he said, suddenly.

'Loyal,' Gambit answered, a strong note of confidence in his voice.

'Purdey?' Evans murmured, in a softer tone. Gambit made no reply. Evans glanced up in surprise, his eyes boring into Gambit's. They seemed shifty, uncertain. 'You have doubts about Purdey?' Doctor Evans queried. 'Some sort of misgivings?'

Gambit shook his head, a thin smile breaking out on his lips. 'None at all,' he declared firmly.

'Then why the hesitation?' Evans demanded, pressing the point.

Gambit's grin broadened. 'You asked me to say the first thought which came into my head. I'm sorry, Doctor Evans, but I try too hard to be a gentleman to blurt that one out.'

Evans was not amused. He sniffed in disgust. 'You're being facetious, Gambit.'

Gambit wiped the smile from his face. 'Sorry,' he apologised. 'Carry on, Doctor.'

Evans sighed. 'There's probably not a great deal to be gained from prolonging this interview, Mr. Gambit. We'll leave it there for now. Please report to the gymnasium now, if you don't mind.'

Gambit nodded curtly. He turned neatly on his heel and strode across to yet another door. He turned the handle, letting himself out into the main security corridor again. Displaying his security pass to the waiting guard, he turned right and strode briskly towards the gymnasium with a new spring in his step. Only when he was out of sight of the guard did he allow the mischievous grin to

break out on his face again. His little bit of fun had made him feel much better.

CHAPTER TWO

Dressed in a loose-fitting karate suit, Gambit poised himself on his toes and prepared to meet his antagonist.

Clive Walters faced him squarely, his face set and impassive. In his right hand, he clasped a wicked-looking bayonet in a firm grip. 'Ready, Gambit?' he asked quietly.

Gambit nodded. 'Ready when you are, Clive.'

'Remember, this is not a friendly,' Walters reminded him grimly. 'I'm trying to kill you, Gambit.'

Despite the seriousness with which the threat was delivered, Gambit managed to smile easily. 'Trying is the operative word,' he said calmly. He backed away, circling warily as Walters moved into action, thrusting the bayonet out in front of him and sweeping it across in a low, lazy arc towards Gambit's belly.

Walters dropped back on to his left foot momentarily, then thrust himself forward, closing the gap between them. The point of the bayonet slashed up towards Gambit's chest.

Gambit bent backwards from the hip, his knees bending under him. The point of the bayonet stabbed empty air, then flashed down again for a sweep across Gambit's left shoulder. Gambit straightened, swivelling from the waist to present only a side view to his opponent. Again, the bayonet missed a fleshy target by several inches.

Dropping the weapon to knee level, Walters tried another form of attack. His left leg snapped up in a straight high-kick, his tensed toes snaking towards Gambit's groin.

Gambit countered with an incredibly fast kick of his own, his bare instep cracking into painful contact with Walters' shin, spinning the man sideways on his one grounded foot. The advantage now his, Gambit continued through in a single, fluid movement. His left hand flew out sideways, the side of his palm chopping Walters just below the shoulder of his right arm. The muscles temporarily paralysed, Walters was unable to stop the bayonet from dropping from numbed fingers on to the mat. With a single kick delivered just under the heart, Gambit finished him off.

Walters collapsed as if pole-axed. Two medical attendants jumped forward quickly, stooping over him. They checked him quickly and expertly, one of them glancing up at Gambit with a relieved grin. 'He'll be fine in a minute. You had him cold, though. Good job you drew back on that last kick.'

Gambit also smiled with relief. Clive Walters was a good friend. He moved slowly backwards to the wall of the gymnasium.

Steed sauntered up beside him. 'That was quick,' he observed, not quite allowing any real admiration to show in his voice.

Gambit nodded ruefully. 'Yes, I suppose it was,' he muttered. 'I suppose I was a bit savage. Not in the best of moods today.'

Steed nodded understandingly. 'Paul Spelman?' he asked.

Gambit nodded. 'God, that man gets under my skin sometimes.'

Steed smiled. 'He's only doing his job.'

Gambit grunted sceptically. 'Maybe . . . but he does it with such cold-blooded efficiency . . . he's like a damned machine. Straight from the rule-book, every time.'

'That's why he's chief liaison officer,' Steed pointed

out. His face suddenly wrinkled into a mischievous grin. 'Anyway . . . where did you hit me?'

Gambit smiled back. 'Right shoulder. Thought I'd give you a chance. Spelman wasn't at all pleased.'

Steed nodded thoughtfully. 'Very decent of you,' he murmured. 'Considering that I let you have it right between the eyes.'

Gambit feigned a hurt expression. 'Steed, how could you?' he asked in an aggrieved tone. 'What about Purdey?'

'Ah, she was a lot more thoughtful,' Steed answered. 'Perhaps she just couldn't bring herself to damage that handsome face of yours.'

A pleased, almost narcissistic smile spread over Gambit's face. 'Good old Purdey,' he exclaimed enthusiastically. 'At least I have one friend who thinks something of me.'

'Not a lot,' Steed continued, almost laughing. 'She put two bullets straight through your heart.'

Gambit glared at him, then glanced aside at the empty mat. 'Just for that, Steed,' he muttered coldly, 'how about a workout . . . you and me?'

Steed shook his head. 'I don't think my tailor would approve.'

'Seriously, Steed,' Gambit went on. 'Do you realise that you and I have never actually faced one another? How about it . . . a straight, fair fight . . . some money on it, perhaps?'

Steed considered for several moments, finally shaking his head. 'No, you're far too young to die, Mike . . . and besides, I never fight fair.'

'Oh well.' Gambit shrugged and began walking towards the exit. 'See you later, Steed.'

Steed watched him go, sucking at his lip pensively.

'He has a damned good point, you know,' said a quiet voice behind him. Steed turned suddenly, to confront his old friend Tom McKay. The man was regarding him

quizzically, through cool grey eyes. He leaned back on his heavy walking stick, which had served to support him ever since his left leg had been shattered by a burst from a Russian AK7, taking him out of active service for good. Now he held down an internal security job within the Department, although no-one really knew exactly what it was, or what it entailed.

'Yes, Gambit had a very good point indeed,' McKay repeated firmly. 'You and he have never faced each other, have you? Perhaps that's an oversight.'

'An oversight, Tom?' Steed smiled gently. 'Have we really come to the stage when each of us has to know exactly what our chances of survival are against each one of our friends?'

'He's a very tough young man,' McKay murmured. 'Wouldn't you *like* to know?'

Steed tensed, sensing something deeper and more menacing beneath the casual, apparent banter of the conversation. 'What exactly are you saying, Tom?'

McKay raised one grizzled eyebrow. 'If you *had* to . . . do you think you could take him?'

Steed evaded the direct question. 'I don't have to . . . and I don't intend to put the matter to the test,' he said firmly. He began to stroll slowly away.

McKay followed him closely, unwilling to let the matter rest. 'Maybe you think you know already,' he mused. 'You think Gambit might treat it as a sport . . . as a game. Whereas you and I, Steed . . . we're different, aren't we? The old school . . . the originals. Never start to play unless you mean to finish, to win?'

Steed stopped in his tracks, whirling upon his old friend irritably. 'What exactly are you trying to say, Tommy?'

McKay's face was completely serious. 'Would you kill him, Steed? *Could* you kill him, if the order was given?'

Steed was becoming rattled, and it showed in his face.

'I think this has gone far enough, Tom. If it's some kind of joke, then it's in exceedingly bad taste.'

McKay was unrepentant. 'It's no joke, Steed,' he said quietly and firmly. 'And as far as bad taste . . . well, yes, we all have a bad taste in our mouths at the moment.'

Steed relaxed slightly, knowing that they were at last through with talking hedgily around the core of the subject. It was time for plain words. 'Alright Tom . . . what's going on?'

McKay looked grave. 'There's a whisper,' he said, simply.

'Whisper?' Steed wanted more than that.

'Well, a loud whisper then,' McKay said. 'Not quite yet a shout . . . but it soon will be. We have a leak, Steed . . . here, in the very heart of the Department.'

Steed looked shocked. It was unthinkable. 'A traitor . . . right here?' he queried in disbelief.

McKay nodded grimly. 'I'm afraid so, Steed. Someone amongst us, on the very highest level of security, has been betraying secret information. It's a priority matter, Steed.'

'This traitor . . . are you suggesting it could be Mike Gambit?' Steed posed the question with an expressionless face and a bland tone.

McKay faced him with an equally emotionless look. 'I'm not suggesting that it *is* Gambit . . . I'm merely pointing out that it *could* be him. Then again, it could be anyone . . . even me.'

'Or me?' questioned Steed. 'I assume that I'm not above suspicion, just because you're telling me this?'

McKay looked at him deeply for some time, finally nodding. 'Oh yes, you could also be the traitor, Steed,' he whispered. 'So you see, under these circumstances, none of us can trust each other . . . even our closest friends. That's about as nasty as things can get, don't you think?'

He turned on his heel and limped away without another word.

Steed watched the man disappear, feeling sick in the pit of his stomach. McKay was right . . . it *did* leave a nasty taste in the mouth!

Purdey smiled brightly as Gambit strolled into the rest room. 'Hi! Finished your workout?'

Gambit nodded glumly. 'Yes, it's almost over, thank Heavens.'

Purdey flashed him a sympathetic glance. 'You don't seem too happy, Mike.'

'I hate these sessions,' the man replied, with deep feeling. 'They really get me in the gut.'

Purdey shrugged in agreement. 'Sure, they're not very pleasant,' she observed. 'But they are part of the job . . . and it's only once a year, after all.'

These words of comfort did little to dissipate Gambit's air of gloom. He shook his head miserably. 'I don't know . . . there's just something about this one . . . I can't quite put my finger on it,' he muttered, uncertainly. 'It all seems particularly tough, more ruthless than usual. It's an atmosphere . . . a strange feeling. I sense that there is something nasty going on . . . something we haven't been told about.'

'IRS's are always tough,' Purdey pointed out. 'Surely, the whole point of an Intensive Retraining Schedule is to remind us that we *are* in a ruthless business . . . shake us out of any complacency we might fall into out of laxity or habit. That's why they really throw us all right back to the starting point . . . re-condition us, in a way.'

Gambit managed to smile thinly for the first time. 'It certainly worked on you, that's for sure,' he said, a little ruefully. 'Steed tells me you shot my dummy twice through the heart.'

Purdey giggled briefly. 'It was very quick,' she murmured soothingly. 'I promise you . . . you didn't feel a thing.' Her face became serious again. 'There really *is* something bothering you . . . isn't there, Mike?'

Gambit nodded abstractedly. 'I don't know. Maybe I'm getting a little paranoid or something. I just can't quite shake off the strange feeling that there's something underhanded going on. Something not quite nice.'

Purdey squeezed his arm in a friendly, reassuring fashion. 'You're just letting things get on top of you, Mike. You'll be alright once we get out of this place. It's not much fun for any of us, being cooped up in a top-security building like this for three whole days and nights. It's almost like being in prison.'

'It's *exactly* like being in prison,' Gambit affirmed. 'And we are all being treated like prisoners . . . as if we were guilty of something. All this business of being made to doubt each other, treat friends as potential enemies, assume the worst about each and every one of our colleagues . . . it all seems totally unnecessary to me. I begin to doubt the very validity of the job itself. I start to feel almost ashamed.'

Purdey whistled softly. 'You really are cracking up, Mike Gambit,' she said, without malice. 'Maybe you ought to do what I'm planning to do after this little session is all over . . . get away somewhere nice and quiet for a few days.'

Gambit brightened. 'Is that an invitation? A pleasant weekend in the country somewhere . . . together?'

He was spared her negative answer. The small call bleeper clipped to Purdey's blouse purred out a message of summons. She glanced down at it, switching it off. 'Looks like Spelman wants me,' she muttered, turning to walk away.

'Damn Spelman,' Gambit cursed under his breath.

Silently fuming, he watched Purdey cross the rest room and exit.

'Ah, Purdey . . . sit down,' Spelman purred as she entered his office. 'I just wanted a brief word before you leave.'

Purdey sat in the chair beside the man's desk, crossing her legs decoratively. 'Final de-briefing?' she asked.

'Not exactly,' Spelman said slowly. He eyed her piercingly. 'Actually, it's about Gambit.'

Purdey's surprise showed in her face. 'Mike? What about him?'

Spelman wasted no time beating about the bush. 'Frankly, I think you are altogether too friendly,' he said bluntly. 'You are too close. I feel that in the best interests of the Department, you should be a lot more wary of him . . . coolly detached, if you like.'

Purdey stifled an incredulous laugh. 'Wary? Of Mike Gambit? Are you trying to protect my maidenly honour, Paul?'

Spelman's face was grim. 'This is no joking matter, Purdey. Right now, I don't think Gambit is to be fully trusted. He's showing definite signs of sloppiness . . . a lack of dedication to the job.'

Purdey could hardly believe her ears. 'Is this another stupid test?' she demanded testily. 'If it is, then I think you are really taking things too far.'

'Facts, Purdey,' Spelman snapped suddenly. 'Look at the facts. Gambit's own words were: "I begin to doubt the very validity of the job". You yourself suggested that he was cracking up.'

Purdey smiled. 'Yes, but I was only joking when I said that,' she started. Suddenly, her face froze as the realiza-

tion hit her. 'How did you know that,' she hissed, in an icy voice.

Spelman stood, bending over the desk and reaching towards her. He unclipped the call bleeper from her blouse and sat down again. Slowly, he unscrewed the bottom of the torch-shaped object and tipped a tiny radio microphone into his palm. He had the decency to look slightly ashamed. 'You were bugged,' he muttered. 'Everybody has been bugged for the past three days.'

Purdey's temper flared. 'That's disgusting,' she spat out. 'You're disgusting, Spelman. That really is taking things too far.'

Spelman sighed heavily. 'I don't give the final orders around here,' he murmured, in an attempt at justification. 'This one came right from the top.'

Purdey stared at him in shocked silence. Denied an immediate scapegoat, she could only seethe with indignant frustration. Finally, she spoke. 'So Gambit was right . . . there *is* something going on?'

Spelman shrugged. 'Just a general tightening up of security, that's all,' he said. 'Anyway, it isn't going to concern you for the next few days, is it? Are you all ready for your little trip?'

Purdey nodded. 'I just have to say goodbye to Steed and Gambit, then drive home to the flat to pick up my suitcase.'

Spelman shook his head. 'Sorry Purdey, but you'll have to forget the first part of that. You will leave immediately by the rear security gate. You will speak to no-one. That's an order.'

Purdey gaped at him for several seconds, finally letting out a snort of disgust. 'Gambit thought *he* was getting paranoid,' she scoffed. 'I think you are becoming positively unbalanced.' She stood up angrily, ready to storm out.

'Back exit,' Spelman reminded her coldly. 'And one

more thing. As you are going on official leave, would you please turn in your security pass and gun, if you don't mind.'

Purdey glared at him, fishing in her handbag for the relevant items. She dropped the tiny pastel-coloured automatic and perspex-sleeved pass on his desk with a gesture of disdain. Turning on her heel, she walked out without a word.

Spelman stood up, crossing to his wall-safe. Opening it, he deposited the gun and security pass inside and locked it up again. Sighing, he returned to his desk and sat down, engrossing himself in a pile of papers. All the extra security, all the additional paperwork. Spelman cursed silently that the Departmental leak was causing so much trouble. It was making his job much more difficult than he wanted it to be. He would have to take extra special precautions. The survival of the Department itself was at stake.

He shrugged the niggling thoughts away and concentrated on the job in hand. Riffing through the pile of papers, he extracted a thin folder and opened it. Carefully, he began to check the contents over for the tenth time, poring laboriously over every little detail. The dossier was a very special one, that no more than two people above himself had ever laid eyes on.

In embarrassingly intimate detail, it was a complete record of every minor breach of discipline committed by John Steed over the past fifteen years with the Department.

CHAPTER THREE

Purdey eased the nose of the car through the security gates and rolled to a halt by the guard hut. She smiled

sweetly at the guard as he approached, his hand extended.

'Pass, miss,' the man murmured, slightly surprised that she had not already proffered it.

'You'll have to call Spelman for confirmation,' Purdey said quietly. 'I handed in my security papers before I left.'

The guard looked at her uncertainly for a moment. Finally he closed down the metal gate-barriers and retreated to his hut, picking up the internal telephone. Purdey drummed her fingers irritably against the steering wheel as he conducted a brief conversation. The intensive security of the past three days had unnerved her, and now, with the prospect of a few days of freedom in front of her, she was even more edgy.

Finally, the guard replaced the telephone and operated the barriers automatically from inside the security hut. He waved Purdey through, on Spelman's orders.

Purdey stamped down on the accelerator as she passed out through the second perimeter fence. She was out and free, with a welcome holiday in front of her. She wanted to get away from the IRS centre as soon as possible, leaving it all behind like a bad dream. Gathering speed, she flashed through the bleak, open countryside surrounding the top-security establishment, eager to get back on to the main road which would take her back to London, her flat, and two ready-packed suitcases.

Behind her, a dark green Vanden Plas Princess rolled quietly out from a sheltered verge, accelerating quickly to follow in her wake. The driver spoke over his shoulder to the single passenger in the rear compartment. 'How close shall I tail her?'

The man in the rear of the car chuckled in his throat. 'As close as you can,' he murmured. 'Knowing Purdey as well as I do, she's in a mood to drive like a kamikaze pilot right now. You have very little choice. To keep up with

her, you're going to have to drive like a bat out of hell yourself. It shouldn't be long before she spots that she is being tailed. From then on . . . James Hunt won't have a say in it.'

The driver shrugged. 'Whatever you say.' He stepped on the gas, letting the Princess find her own top speed. Satisfied that he was keeping a regular distance behind his quarry, he spoke again. 'Seems a lot of trouble to go to, all this. Just for a woman.'

His passenger grunted. 'Don't underestimate Purdey,' he said quietly. 'Believe me, she's no ordinary woman.'

'But two grown men . . . and another two as a back-up,' the driver protested. 'It's a little bit like sending a steam-roller to crack a nut to me.'

His companion chuckled again. 'You'll find her a tougher nut to crack than you think, believe me.' He broke off, his voice suddenly urgent as he spotted a sudden burst of vapour from the exhaust of Purdey's car. 'There . . . I told you, she's spotted us already. Better get your foot down on to the floorboards . . . and fast!'

With a sudden, and unusual snarl of power, the Princess surged forward again as Purdey's car quickly began to pull away, dwindling to a small red blur in the distance.

'It's no use, we're going to lose her,' the driver complained. He sounded a little panicky.

His passenger continued to speak in a calm, unconcerned voice. 'Relax, Vernon. I'm a man who never leaves anything to chance . . . remember? Just keep up as much speed as you can for another two miles or so. I hadn't quite allowed for her spotting us so soon, but it doesn't matter all that much. There's a turn-off . . . a short-cut . . . a bit further up this road. We can cut her off, make up a good minute and a half in running time, even at her speed.'

'Can't she take it too?' Vernon queried.

His passenger shook his head. 'It's a private farm entrance, blocked by a locked gate. I have the key,' he said calmly.

Vernon drove on in silence for a while, until his passenger leaned forward and tapped him lightly on the shoulder. 'All right, start slowing down now,' he hissed. 'The turn-off is just around the next bend.'

Purdey glanced into her rear-view mirror again, smiling to herself as she saw it was completely clear. The Vandén-Plas had been left standing, as easily as if it had been a farm tractor. Feeling confident, Purdey eased up on the accelerator, dropping below eighty-five for the first time in the past few minutes. She braked even harder as a sharp right-hand bend loomed up, the road curving around in a virtual hair-pin to almost double back on itself. Negotiating the bend skilfully, if a little spectacularly, she straightened the car up and accelerated yet again, leaving twin curves of black rubber on the roadway behind her. The speedometer crept upwards to the eighty mph mark once again. Purdey didn't believe in taking chances.

Vernon lowered his Zeiss field glasses, grinning with satisfaction. 'Here she comes,' he announced. 'You were right.'

His companion shrugged his shoulders. 'I invariably am,' he said softly, without a trace of false pride or boastfulness. It was simply the honest, factual statement of a man who knew, and accepted, his own evaluation of himself. 'Well, you know what to do,' he went on. 'You'll have to take care of her on your own. I'll have to stay in the car . . . I don't want her to see me clearly, just in case

anything goes wrong. Think you can handle things?’

Vernon laughed briefly. ‘No trouble,’ he muttered confidently. Easing off the handbrake, he let the Princess roll out of the farm entrance on to the narrow country road, stopping it when the bonnet had blocked off over half its width. He jumped out, pulling a Luger from under his jacket and slipping off the safety catch. Crouching down behind the side of the car, he rested the barrel of the gun on the bonnet and waited for Purdey to drive into range.

As ever, Purdey’s reactions were lightning fast. Rounding a gradual bend, her keen eyes picked up the obstructing car, rapidly identifying it as a dark green Vanden Plas. It was all she needed to know at that stage. Her foot flashed to the brake pedal, her hands tightening on the steering wheel as she stamped it down. The car’s rear wheels locked briefly, before the anti-skid circuit cut in. In a long, sliding arc, the car slewed across the road and ploughed against the soft bank, coming to a final halt with a squeal of brakes and tyres.

Less than fifteen yards from the Princess, Purdey hurriedly started to engage reverse, to escape back up the road she had come down.

Vernon leapt out from behind the Princess. Bringing the Luger up, he squeezed off a single, careful shot. A small, crystal-edged hole appeared in Purdey’s windscreen, less than three inches to the side of her head. Vernon’s scream followed the brief crack of the gunshot. ‘Freeze . . . or I kill you.’

Purdey’s hand came off the gear stick. She pulled her foot gently back off the clutch. The man meant business, that was for sure. She sat waiting as he ran towards her, the gun held out in a professional manner.

‘O.K. . . . put your palms up against the windscreen where I can see ’em,’ Vernon snapped as he approached

Purdey's car. He waved the muzzle of the Luger to reinforce his command.

She did as she was told. There wasn't very much choice. Vernon nodded to himself with satisfaction, skirting around the driving side of the car and reaching down for the door handle. The gun unwavering in his hand, he threw the door open wide and leered in. 'Now you get out . . . nice and slowly,' he hissed. 'Anything that looks like a trick and you get a bullet straight through that pretty head of yours.'

Purdey glanced sideways at her attacker, forcing a smile. 'Thank you for the compliment,' she said gracefully. With gentle grace, she eased herself sideways out of the bucket seat and stood in the road.

'Hands on the top of your head,' Vernon barked.

Purdey pouted. 'Must I? It'll ruin my hair,' she complained.

Vernon wasn't to be fazed by her apparent unconcern. His companion had warned him of the girl's style. It was meant to confuse and disorientate any would-be assailant, put them off guard. Vernon had taken the warning to heart. He wasn't going to forget it now. 'Do what you're damn well told,' he shouted angrily. 'And keep your lip buttoned.'

Purdey's eyebrows lifted a fraction. The man was brisk and businesslike. There was none of the awkward, hesitancy of the amateur gunman, or the frightened, cornered small-time crook. The man she was facing was a full-time, cold-blooded pro, that was clear. A killer. A mechanic. It seemed eminently sensible to obey his orders to the letter. Purdey did just that, silently.

Vernon allowed himself a thin, brief smile. 'That's better,' he muttered in a quieter voice. He jerked the Luger. 'Now, turn round slowly, and bend forward over the bonnet of your car.'

Still keeping her clasped hands on top of her head, Purdey followed his instructions. Her head fell sideways, apparently helplessly, but the gesture was not without purpose. She looked at the half-concealed Vanden Plas, trying to read the number plate and check for other passengers at the same time. It was useful to know the exact odds at a time like this.

She had only a brief glance. As if sensing her move, Vernon's free hand snaked forward, his fingers burying themselves in her blonde hair. Savagely, he pulled up her head, twisting it quickly back until she faced down at the bonnet of the car. 'Just keep your eyes right there,' he hissed, warningly.

Purdey shuddered with distaste as the man's hand patted quickly all over her body, checking for hidden armament. Satisfied that she was carrying nothing, Vernon stepped back a couple of paces. 'O.K. you can straighten up now,' he told her. 'Turn around, very very slowly, and start walking towards my car.'

Purdey tensed her athletic body as she slowly raised herself erect and prepared to swivel on the balls of her feet. Without making it apparent, she was bringing into play all the secret, hidden muscles and reflexes which the years of martial arts training had discovered and awakened into life. She sensed, instinctively, that this was the moment. It was now or never. Once she allowed herself to be bundled into the Vanden Plas, her chances of escape would be minimal.

The gun was the primary target. Fists and muscle she could take on, but there was no arguing with a bullet. With deceptive slowness and feminine grace, Purdey began to move forward, pushing herself gently away from the side of her car. Vernon fell into step a couple of paces behind her, the Luger never wavering from a point immediately above the nape of Purdey's slim and elegant neck.

Suddenly, half-way through an apparent step forward, Purdey's upper torso weaved sideways, and abruptly, the muzzle of the Luger was pointing only at empty air. Throwing herself back on her captor, Purdey smashed her head hard into the man's shoulder, reaching over her own shoulder at the same moment with both hands to grasp the extended arm holding the gun. As Vernon staggered back, off balance, Purdey tensed herself anew, using the man's own bulk as a weapon against him. Her feet dug into the surface of the roadway, creating a central balance point upon which she concentrated all the hidden power of her lithe body. Purdey was the fulcrum, Vernon was the end of the lever. Like a slow-motion catapult, Purdey hauled the heavy man off his feet and over her shoulder into the air.

He landed heavily on his back, the fall knocking the air out of his lungs and sending the Luger flying from his grasp to skid harmlessly across the roadway. Following quickly through in a practised movement, Purdey's right foot lashed out quickly twice in succession, her shoe making hard and telling contact with Vernon's kidneys and shoulder. As the man contorted with pain, Purdey put him temporarily out of his misery with one last kick delivered neatly in the side of his head. He lay still immediately, out for the count.

There was not a lot of point in hanging around, Purdey decided rather quickly. Breaking into a sprint, she headed back towards her car and threw herself in, snapping the engine into life and engaging reverse gear. With a squeal of tyres, she wobbled back down the country road, leaving the unconscious Vernon sprawled across it.

Only when she was satisfied that she was out of accurate pistol range from the second occupant of the Vanden Plas did Purdey halt the backward movement of her car and start the awkward business of turning in the narrow

road. She made it in four moves, carving large chunks of grass and dirt out of the roadside verges in the process. Safe from immediate pursuit, she stamped down on the accelerator and hurled the car forwards into the tortuous bends of the country road.

Shaken, and still badly winded, Vernon eased himself painfully to his feet. Shaking his head and groaning loudly, he began to limp slowly back to his car.

The passenger threw the door open as Vernon staggered towards the vehicle. He was smiling, albeit a trifle cynically. 'Now perhaps you understand why I said she is no ordinary woman?' he demanded. 'And now you might also begin to understand why I insisted upon having a back-up plan and a complement of at least two more men? I trust your painfully-learned lesson will be of use to you, my dear Vernon. It would be a pity if the lady's efforts went to waste.'

Vernon hauled himself painfully into the driving seat. 'What now?' he croaked.

His colleague chuckled. 'Now we do the job properly,' he answered. 'She will have to take a long and roundabout route now that she has turned around. We should have no trouble in intercepting her.' He prodded Vernon in the back. 'Let's go then. Make up as much ground as you can . . . that is assuming your driving is of a better standard than your unarmed combat.'

Vernon smarted under the indignities which were being heaped upon him. His face twitched with anger and embarrassment. He leaned forward to turn the ignition key in the lock, wincing with pain from his bruised kidneys as he did so.

It brought only another slightly malicious laugh from his partner. 'Yes, I really do think that you will remember

this little lesson for some time to come,' he observed. 'But never mind, perhaps we can arrange for some kind of consolation. A special reward, to make you feel better about it.'

'A consolation?' Vernon hissed.

His companion nodded. 'Yes, something which will keep you happy and contented in your work. What would you like, my dear Vernon?'

Vernon gritted his teeth. His eyes glinted viciously. 'I'd like to kill the bitch,' he grated out, with savage vehemence. 'I'd like to do it slowly, painfully.'

His companion chuckled again. 'Well, perhaps you shall,' he murmured soothingly. 'Maybe we can arrange for you to have that one small pleasure quite soon.'

With this carrot dangling under his nose, Vernon shrugged away his frustrations. Slamming the car into gear, he roared away towards London.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gambit burst into Spelman's private office without bothering to knock. 'Where's Purdey?' he demanded angrily.

Spelman looked up disdainfully, a faint sneer forming on his lips. He adopted a deliberately cool, somehow vaguely insulting tone. 'It's a pity we don't have basic retraining facilities for good manners in this establishment. You might find them beneficial.'

Gambit sat down without being invited, shrugging off the intended slur. 'Come off your high horse, Spelman. I'm not one of your faceless Departmental lackeys.'

'You could be,' Spelman replied, icily. 'I can take you out of the field at any time, Gambit . . . don't forget that.'

I can push you into some small, unpleasant office somewhere in the Department . . . make sure that you fulfil the full term of your security commitment under the most boring and soul-destroying conditions imaginable. One word from me, Gambit, and you can be classed as unfit for active service immediately.'

Gambit forced a laugh in the face of the threat. 'Steed would never let you get away with it.'

Spelman smiled thinly. 'I wouldn't count on that, if I were you,' he countered.

The man's calm assurance had the desired effect. Gambit simmered down, his tone becoming slightly more conciliatory. 'I'd just like to know what you've done with Purdey,' he said in a quieter voice. 'She has completely disappeared. You, apparently, were the last person to see her.'

Spelman grinned infuriatingly. 'You seem to be crediting me with superhuman powers I don't deserve,' he murmured. 'Do you think I'm a master illusionist or something? That I have locked the young lady into a laquered cabinet and spirited her away? I have done nothing with Purdey. She has simply left . . . gone away of her own free will.'

Gambit shook his head, refusing to believe the man. 'She wouldn't have left without saying goodbye to me,' he maintained.

Spelman became openly contemptuous. 'My God, you do flatter yourself, Gambit. I tell you she went . . . and did not, obviously, consider you so important that she had to ask your kind permission.'

'Where? Where has she gone?' Gambit insisted.

'Away,' Spelman muttered vaguely. He was beginning to take a faint pleasure in Gambit's obvious discomfort.

Gambit slammed his clenched fist down on to Spelman's desk. 'Where, dammit?' he repeated. 'Is she on a mission?'

'No, she's on a holiday,' Spelman said quietly. 'And although her destination is absolutely none of your business, I'll tell you anyway, just to keep you quiet. She has gone to spend a few days with her mother, as it happens.' He broke off to smile secretively. 'A thoroughly charming woman. Splendid hostess.'

Gambit fell for the baited hook. 'You've met her mother?' he asked, in some surprise.

Spelman grinned broadly. He was really beginning to enjoy himself now. 'Oh yes, several times,' he murmured. He leered up at Gambit. 'Of course, I forget . . . you haven't ever managed to get your feet under that particular table, have you?'

Gambit's stony glare was his answer. Spelman almost chortled with delight. 'Well, that's Purdey for you,' he carried on, rubbing salt into an open wound. 'She's very discriminating.'

Gambit's overdue explosion was pre-empted by the shrilling of Spelman's security phone. He picked it up briskly. 'Yes?'

Gambit watched him as he digested the contents of the telephone message, his face becoming serious. Finally, he replaced the receiver, settled back in his chair and looked up at Gambit. 'That was the lady in question,' he muttered grimly. 'It seems she has had a little trouble.'

Gambit's concern was immediate. 'Is she all right?'

Spelman nodded. 'Resourceful girl. She was followed by a Vanden Plas Princess immediately after leaving here. She outran it, but somehow they cut her off and one man held her at gunpoint. She managed to beat him off and escape.'

'Oh, that's all right then,' Gambit breathed, with great relief.

Spelman looked extremely grim as he shook his head. 'It's far from all right, Gambit,' he said in a chilling tone.

'This is a top-security establishment. Absolutely no-one outside this Department should have known she was here.' He was silent for several seconds. Finally, he sighed heavily. 'But that's only one problem.'

'There's trouble?' Gambit interrupted quickly.

Spelman's face was an expressionless mask. 'Possibly the very nastiest sort of trouble to have,' he muttered distantly. 'Purdey says that she only got a brief glimpse of another man in the car which followed her . . .'

His voice tailed off uncertainly. 'What about him?' Gambit pressed, urgently.

Spelman drummed his fingers on the table for several seconds before answering. When he did, it was in a sinister whisper. 'She says it looked like John Steed . . . and Steed left here less than a quarter of an hour before she did.'

CHAPTER FIVE

Purdey walked down the steps to the front door of her basement flat, fishing in her handbag for the key. She slipped it into the lock and pushed the door ajar cautiously. Satisfied that there were no obvious signs of intruders, she stepped inside, closing the door behind her.

She took two steps into the lounge, stopping dead in her tracks as she saw the familiar figure of Steed standing by the French windows, looking out. The broad shoulders, the immaculate grey Savile Row suit and matching bowler were unmistakable trademarks.

'Steed . . . what on earth are you doing here?' Purdey moved towards him, a little indignant that the man had seen fit to forget his customary good manners and let himself into her private residence like a thief.

The man turned, smiling. 'Purdey, my dear.'

Shock gave way to panic as the man's face became clearly visible.

'You're not Steed,' Purdey blurted out, somewhat superfluously.

The big man smiled. 'How observant you are, my dear Purdey. Those big blue eyes of yours are functional as well as highly decorative.'

Purdey backed off warily. 'It was you . . . in the car, earlier,' she accused.

The man nodded. 'It was indeed. I trust that you did exactly what I wished you to do . . . telephone your superiors with the information? Tell them that you couldn't be sure, but you thought you saw John Steed sitting in the ambush vehicle?'

Purdey made no attempt at an answer. She was not going to give the man the satisfaction of knowing that his plan had worked perfectly. After regarding her quizzically for some seconds, he shrugged carelessly. 'No? You're not going to tell me? Ah, well, no matter.' He fell silent, smiling broadly as Purdey crouched, tensing into a fighting stance. 'I shouldn't bother with all that, if I were you my dear. I am not alone, of course. Friend Vernon has a gun trained on the back of your pretty little head at this very moment. If you would care to look over your shoulder towards the bathroom . . .'

A hurried glance confirmed the fact. Vernon stepped out from his hiding place, a silenced gun in his hand and a wicked glint in his grey eyes. 'We meet again,' he hissed, hatefully.

'Yes. We're older now . . . but no wiser,' Purdey quipped, as she sprang into action. With a flying high-kick, her foot clipped the gun clean out of Vernon's grasp, sending it flying across the room. Spinning, Purdey jabbed out her extended fingers into his solar plexus,

chopping down on the back of his neck as he began to fold up.

'Oh, really!' Steed's double clicked his tongue in a gesture of exasperation. 'We aren't going to go through this charade again, are we?' He called over towards the bedroom. 'Marvin, come and show poor Vernon how it's done, will you?'

Purdey gaped as a veritable mountain of a man shambled out through her bedroom door towards her. The massive brute called Marvin would have doubled for yet another remake of King Kong with little need for make-up or special effects. Before turning to the easier pickings of a life of crime, he had enjoyed considerable success as a fairground wrestler, brought to an abrupt end only when the bills for his opponent's injuries began to outstrip his weekly wages. Arms akimbo, he plodded across the room towards Purdey, his face blank and moronic.

The man disguised as Steed chuckled softly. 'Don't let the fact that Marvin looks like an oversized ape worry you unduly,' he murmured to Purdey. 'He's really quite a gentle and sensitive soul, underneath that deceptive exterior. Indeed, he is here as much for your protection as anything else. He likes pretty things . . . he likes to cherish and look after them. He'll keep Vernon away from you. Vernon might have been tempted to do something nasty to you after the way you treated him on your last encounter. He has this terrible habit of over-reacting to being kicked in the kidneys, you see.'

The light-hearted banter did nothing to rob the moment of danger and urgency. Purdey danced lightly on her feet as the huge man closed in on her. Pivoting on one foot, she delivered a kick straight into the side of Marvin's chin.

The man absorbed the full force of the blow without any apparent effects. It did not stop his slow forward

momentum for a fraction of a second, nor did the faintest suggestion of pain show on his simian features. Dropping back a couple of paces, Purdey aimed two more kicks in rapid succession at the man's stomach and heart, but apart from a faint hiss of exhaled breath, Marvin showed no sign that he had felt them.

With a thud, Purdey felt herself slam back against the wall. Marvin closed in on her, his massive arms encircling her slim body. In a vice-like grip, he held her fast. Grinning vacantly, he turned his head. 'What shall I do with her now, Packer?' he intoned in a dreamy voice.

Packer, the surrogate Steed, let out one of his chilling and humourless chuckles. 'Give her a little squeeze and cuddle, Marvin,' he suggested. 'Just to show the pretty lady how much you like her . . . and as a taste of what she can expect if she doesn't behave herself.'

Marvin grunted with bestial laughter. 'I like that,' he mumbled, flexing his arm muscles as he tightened them into a bear-hug around Purdey's shoulders.

Desperately, Purdey sucked in deep lungfulls of air and tensed her shoulder and chest muscles as the grip took effect, but it was no use. Crushed as if by a hydraulic press, she could only let out a thin squeal of agony as the air was squeezed out of her body. She heard the ominous creaking of tortured ribs.

'That's enough!' Packer's voice barked out suddenly. 'We don't want to kill the lady, do we? Well, not for the moment, anyway.' Stepping forward, he delved into his pocket and extracted a hypodermic syringe, filled with a faintly greenish-brown liquid. Plunging the needle deep into Purdey's right shoulder, he rammed home the plunger savagely. She went limp almost immediately, only Marvin's strong arms preventing her from collapsing in a heap upon the floor.

Packer turned to the luckless Vernon, who was just dragging himself to his feet once again. 'Sometimes, my dear Vernon, I feel you are not quite cut out for this job,' he observed acidly. 'However, perhaps there is something you can do right . . . send a telegram to Purdey's mother, to read: "Sorry, can't make it today. Phone next week. Love P."'

Had Purdey been conscious, she would have been sharply reminded that her captors seemed to know an awful lot about her most intimate details. No-one except her closest friends could have known that she always signed personal notes and letters with just her initial.

But she was not conscious. Packer looked at her limp, drugged body with a satisfied grin. 'Well, that takes care of the bait,' he muttered, to no-one in particular. 'We have the sprat . . . now to catch the mackerel.'

Crossing to the telephone, he dialled a nearby public call box. When the man loitering outside in readiness answered, Packer barked out a terse command. 'Bring the car round, Symonds. We have her.' Replacing the receiver, he issued orders to his other two cohorts. 'Make a bit of mess, kick a few things around,' he said to Vernon. 'We want Steed to see some signs of violence, don't we?'

As the man began to smash ornaments and tear furnishing fabrics, Packer nodded to Marvin. 'Pick her up.'

Grinning amiably, the huge man scooped Purdey up in his arms as effortlessly as if she had been a rag doll and followed his master towards the door. Packer ushered him out with his burden as the green Vanden-Plas screamed to a halt in the street outside. 'Right, let's go,' he muttered, taking one last look at the malicious damage inflicted by Vernon, and smiling with satisfaction.

CHAPTER SIX

Steed extracted the cork from a bottle of vintage claret with a practised flourish. Carefully pouring two crystal goblets, he carried them across his elegant drawing room to where his female companion lay draped, decoratively, over an antique chesterfield.

'Suzy, my dear. An appetizer before dinner.'

Suzy Pilkington made no attempt to reach for the glass. Instead, she delved behind a cushion, pulling out a small framed photograph which she had previously secreted there. She arched her beautiful eyebrows in a mock frown. 'You've been holding out on me, John. Who's this?'

Steed glanced, casually, at the beautiful face smiling out of the silver frame. 'Oh that? That's Purdey,' he answered casually.

Suzy pouted her full lips in a gesture of petulance. 'And who is Purdey?' she went on, in a more interrogative tone.

Steed smiled, shrugging his shoulders. 'Just someone I know,' he said quietly. 'A friend, if you like.'

'How good a friend?' Suzy demanded, her voice dropping several degrees.

Steed laughed openly. 'I do believe you're jealous,' he murmured. 'It really doesn't suit you.' He proffered the claret once more. 'The longer I hold this glass, the more my body heat raises the wine over room temperature,' he warned her. 'It really would be a pity to spoil the superb bouquet.'

Suzy dropped the photograph on to the chesterfield beside her and accepted the goblet. 'I most certainly am *not* jealous,' she insisted, in an aggrieved tone.

'Good. Then we can go and eat our meal,' Steed said quickly, neatly circumventing the direction of conversation.

The ploy failed. Suzy was only just getting into her stride. 'You still haven't told me who she is,' she reminded him.

'Ah!' Steed pondered for a few seconds. 'Did I ever tell you that I rode point for the Lazy Tee Ranch when I was a young man?' he muttered vaguely. 'A genuine cattle drive . . . all the way from Arizona to the Black Hills country.'

'Steed . . . you're being evasive,' Suzy murmured reprovingly.

Steed's eyes opened wide in an expression of injured innocence. 'No, truthfully,' he assured her. 'I may seem an unlikely cowboy, I must admit . . . but out there they judge you only by your seat in a saddle and your capacity for beans. You learn a lot of interesting things . . . like "mavericks", for instance.'

'Mavericks?' Against her will, Suzy was being drawn into Steed's anecdote.

'Umm. Lovely term, don't you agree?' Steed sipped at his wine, smacking his lips appreciatively. 'A free spirit . . . a loner . . . an animal which chooses to cut out from the common herd, assert its individuality. Aloof, detached, difficult to pin down. A rare, and dying breed . . .'

The telephone cut into Steed's conversation. Turning from his companion, he crossed the room briskly and lifted the receiver to his ear. 'Hello?'

Vernon's voice purred over the telephone. 'You think Purdey is with her mother, don't you Steed?'

'I beg your pardon?' Steed muttered, taken aback. 'Who is this? What do you want?'

'Take a look in your garage, Steed,' Vernon hissed. The line clicked and went dead.

Steed stared at the useless instrument with a puzzled frown for some time before dropping it back into its cradle. 'Purdey?' he murmured to himself.

Suzy regarded him with a bemused expression as he hurried from the room without a word of explanation or apology.

Hastily, Steed threw open the garage doors, peering inside. His eyes took in his own stable of vehicles . . . the vintage Bentley, the Rover, the Jaguar, the Range-Rover. And, parked neatly behind them, Purdey's car.

Steed walked over to it slowly, examining it in minute detail. He stared apprehensively at the bullet-hole in the windscreen. Faintly, he heard his telephone ring again inside the house. Spinning on his heel, he began to race back to answer it.

Suzy was just about to lift the receiver as Steed flew into the drawing room. 'Don't touch it,' Steed screamed at her. Her hand froze, inches above the telephone. She looked at him coldly.

'There's absolutely no need to shout at me like that,' she complained, stepping back as Steed positively jumped across the room and snatched up the receiver. This time, it was Packer on the other end of the line.

'Surprised at your little addition, Steed?' he chuckled.

'Look what's all this about?' Steed demanded.

Packer tut-tutted chidingly. 'Don't ask stupid questions, Mr. Steed. Just listen. I will tell you everything you need to know. First of all, I know you are not alone. You have a female visitor. Get rid of her . . . immediately. We will call you back in exactly three minutes.'

The line went dead again. Steed replaced the receiver thoughtfully, turning towards Suzy. She was still bristling with indignation at his brusque manner. 'Now look here, John . . .' she started.

Steed cut her short with a wave of his hand. 'Suzy . . .

I'm terribly sorry to have to be so abrupt,' he said apologetically, 'but I'm afraid you must leave . . . immediately. Urgent business . . . I really wouldn't be so churlish unless it was absolutely vital . . . but it is . . . a matter of life and death.' He reached out, grasping her hand and tugging her gently towards the door. 'I have to throw you out, Suzy . . . much against my will, I might add. But perhaps later this week?'

Suzy Pilkington slid her hand away in a disdainful gesture. 'I wouldn't count on it,' she said in an icy voice. She picked up her wrap from a nearby chair and swept towards the door, pausing in the portal. 'I'm glad you explained about mavericks,' she said, as a parting shot, slamming the door behind her.

Steed hardly seemed to notice her departure. He stood, staring at the silent telephone, his face creased with worry.

It jangled again at the promised second. Steed's fingers were already poised above the receiver. He snatched it up feverishly.

'You're alone now, Steed?' asked Packer's voice. 'Your charming lady companion has left you?'

'Yes . . . but how . . . ?'

'How did we know you had female company?' Packer finished the question for him. 'Oh, we know a great deal about you, Steed. More than you might imagine. Would you like to know your score on the pistol range at the IRS centre? Shall I tell you which tie you are wearing today? Or shall I tell you about Purdey?'

'What about Purdey?' Steed snapped, his nerves jangled by Packer's patronising, quietly menacing voice.

'We have her, Steed. She is our captive.'

'Why, what do you want?' Steed asked, trying to sound calmer than he really felt.

Packer chuckled delightedly. 'Ah, that's better. You're beginning to sound much more amenable, Steed. We are

beginning to understand one another, I think.'

'I'm going to hang up,' Steed announced suddenly.

'What?' For a second, it was Packer who was obviously rattled, thrown off balance by the unexpected reaction.

'I am going to hang up this phone in exactly ten seconds,' Steed repeated, in a calm but firm voice. 'Unless you tell me exactly who you are, what you want, and give me proof that you do have Purdey, and that she is alive and unharmed.' There was a stunned silence. Steed began to count. 'One, two, three . . .'

'Alright Steed. We'll get down to business,' Packer said quickly. 'As I said, we have Purdey and if you want to see her alive again, you will do exactly as I tell you. My name doesn't matter, and for the moment, we will just say that only a certain sum of money will buy Purdey's freedom. One false move on your part, and she's dead, Steed . . . I want you to believe that, for both your sakes. You must tell absolutely no-one of this conversation . . . do you understand? We will contact you again to discuss terms.'

'I believe nothing until you give me proof that Purdey is alive and well,' Steed insisted.

Packer clucked with annoyance. 'That is a little difficult just now, Steed. You are an awkward man. The lady is still unconscious at present . . . a harmless drug, you understand.'

'Call me back when she regains consciousness,' Steed suggested.

There was a brief silence, then Packer chuckled knowingly. 'And give you time to arrange a telephone trace? Oh no, Steed, you're not dealing with amateurs. There is a public telephone box about half a mile from the end of your drive . . . do you know it?'

'Yes,' Steed answered simply, the disappointment showing in his voice.

'Good. Be there in twenty minutes time,' Packer said. 'And remember, Steed . . . tell absolutely no-one about this, or Purdey is dead. Especially Gambit, Steed . . . don't breathe a word to Gambit. He's just the sort . . . headstrong, reckless . . . who would rush in and get her killed for sure.'

'You have my word,' Steed muttered. 'Twenty minutes.'

'To the second,' Packer confirmed, and hung up.

Vernon looked up at Packer with some surprise as he replaced the telephone. 'Twenty minutes? You're leaving him a lot of time to get things organised, aren't you? The girl is almost conscious . . . we could have revived her enough to give Steed the confirmation he needed.'

Packer smiled. 'That's your trouble, Vernon . . . no finesse,' he muttered. 'I'm giving Steed time to think, to brood. Time to let the nerves crawl to the surface. Let him sweat a bit, make him more flexible to our demands. He won't contact anyone else . . . he values Purdey too highly for that. No, twenty minutes is just about right, I should think.'

He looked down at the victim in question. Purdey was just beginning to stir as the effects of the drug wore off. She groaned faintly, and opened her eyes. The first sight which greeted her was not a pleasant one. Marvin's ugly, ape-like face, pressed close to hers, was not the sort of thing a lady likes to wake up to.

She shook herself fully conscious, taking in her surroundings. She was seated, in a hard-backed chair. A brief visual reconnaissance told her that she was not tied up.

The room was a large one, littered with old packing cases, display racks and store mannekins. It was obviously a warehouse of some kind, probably above a large store or clothing shop. Directly across from where she was sitting,

there was a door. It did not appear to be locked or bolted.

Purdey moved instinctively, despite the fact that her limbs felt like lead, from the traces of the drug still in her bloodstream. Throwing herself forward, she made a dash for the door.

It registered dully that none of the three men made any apparent move to stop her. Hand outstretched to grasp and turn the door handle, Purdey sensed that freedom need only be a matter of seconds away.

Six feet short of the door, a terrible pain tore at her throat, choking the air out of her windpipe. Some terrible force seemed to seize her from behind, lifting her up and backwards at the same time. Heavily, she crashed to the floor, gasping for breath.

Marvin shambled across to her, bending down to scoop her up again. He carried her back to the chair, sitting her down gently.

Purdey clutched at her throat, which felt as though it were on fire. Her fingers encountered the cool, unfamiliar feel of metal. Slowly, she turned her head. She was secured to the wall behind her chair by a strong metal chain, the other end firmly padlocked to a steel collar which encircled her neck. Like a dog on a lead, Purdey was completely at the mercy of her masters.

'That was rather foolish,' Packer muttered, without a trace of sympathy in his voice. 'You could have broken your pretty little neck . . . and where would we all have been? A dead hostage is not much use to anyone.'

'Hostage?' Purdey croaked. 'You're holding me to ransom?' It was the first clue as to the reason for her abduction.

Packer nodded absently. 'Yes. A little old-fashioned, I suppose, but it becomes very difficult thinking up original crimes these days. They've all been done before, you see.'

He was giving nothing away. Purdey realised that only

time, and the passage of events, was going to reveal her true situation. She lapsed into a sullen silence.

Packer glanced at his watch. 'It's about time,' he muttered. He moved towards the telephone. His hand poised above the receiver, he continued to look at his watch until the exact twenty minutes was up. Precisely on the second, he snatched up the receiver and dialled the number of the public call box.

Steed answered immediately. 'Yes?'

'Ah, Steed. Sorry to make you run around like this,' Packer apologised, chuckling. 'Now, to business. We want five thousand pounds . . . used notes, of mixed denomination, no consecutive serial numbers. You have until tomorrow to gather the money together, you'll get precise instructions for delivery then.'

'Purdey,' Steed said urgently. 'Let me speak to Purdey.'

'Yes of course.' Packer turned away from the phone, snapping his fingers.

Marvin lifted Purdey bodily out of her chair and dragged her across to the telephone. Packer lifted it to her lips.

'Steed? Warehouse . . . dummies . . . ' Purdey's message was abruptly cut off as Marvin slammed his huge paw over her mouth. He dragged her away again, keeping her mouth covered.

Packer looked over at her and shook his head in a warning gesture. 'That was foolish,' he muttered. He turned back to the telephone. 'That's as much as you get, Steed. Five thousand pounds . . . remember.'

He replaced the receiver, crossing to Purdey. Lifting his hand, he slapped her once across the face. 'No more tricks, please.'

Purdey glared up at him, smarting with indignation as much as reaction to the slap. 'Five thousand pounds?' she queried derisively. 'I find that vaguely insulting. A mere

business executive rates more than that these days. Hasn't inflation hit the kidnapping business yet?'

Packer grinned broadly. 'Oh, that? Yes, you're quite right, of course . . . the money is chickenfeed. A mere trifle. We value you a lot more highly than that, my dear. It's not money we are after.'

He did not elaborate. Purdey glared at him, silently fuming, wondering what the entire episode was really all about.

Steed stepped out of the telephone box, immersed in deep thought. The comparatively small sum of money worried him too, for it didn't quite fit. The entire operation was too professional, too highly organised to be geared to such an amateurish extortion. Packer had said 'we' . . . thus revealing that two or more people were involved in Purdey's abduction. Five thousand, split only two ways, was a ridiculously low figure. Steed mulled over Purdey's attempted message. 'Warehouse . . . dummies'. He shook his head in bewilderment and frustration. It was too little to go on, giving away nothing. With a sinking feeling, he realised that he was going to have to play along, see the unpleasant business right through to its conclusion. There was no other choice open to him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

'Good morning, sir.' The receptionist smiled warmly at Steed as he walked, briskly, into the Security Office and headed for the Privileged Persons lift to the upper corridors.

Steed hardly noticed her, flashing his security pass

absently as he walked past, deep in his own troubled thoughts. He rode up in the elevator, pausing as it sighed open to show his pass once more to the attendant guard, then striding down the corridor towards the inner sanctum.

Entering, he went straight to his own private office and locked himself in. He picked up the internal telephone. 'Have there been any calls for me?' he asked the operator bluntly.

'No, Mr. Steed. Nothing this morning.'

'Very well. If anything comes in for me at all, I want it put straight through on my private line, scrambler operative. On no account are any calls to me to be put through the tape recorder . . . is that understood?'

The telephone operator sounded unsure of herself. 'That's rather irregular, sir,' she queried.

'Do it. That's an order,' Steed snapped testily.

'Yes, sir,' the girl answered meekly. Steed hung up.

The inter-office communications set on his desk buzzed softly. Steed flipped the switch. 'Yes?'

'Ah, John . . . come into my office, will you?' Tom McKay sounded worried.

Steed walked out of his own office, locking it again behind him. He walked down the corridor to McKay's top-security room, tapping gently on the door. 'Steed,' he called softly through the door microphone.

There was a faint electrical hum as McKay operated the security lock from inside. The door swung open. McKay had little time for pleasantries. His voice was brisk and efficient. 'Come in John. Sit down.' He produced a large manilla envelope from his desk drawer. In the right-hand corner, it bore the small red star which labelled it as absolutely top secret material. 'If the rumour that there is a leak within the Department is true, it could be this they are after,' he said grimly, waving the envelope.

'What is it?' Steed asked.

McKay looked grim. 'Full Allied Attack Plans. We have custody of the damned thing until we can hand it over to the Americans next week. It's a responsibility I don't relish one little bit . . . especially under these circumstances.' He broke off, noticing Steed's drawn, strained expression for the first time. 'Are you alright John? You look tired.'

Steed forced a smile. 'Didn't sleep too well last night,' he lied. 'Couple of oysters I had for supper decided to get drunk on champagne. Had a party in my stomach.'

'Ah.' McKay nodded understandingly.

His desk intercom buzzed. McKay reached out to it, flipping on the loudspeaker. The telephone operator's voice grated out. 'There's an outside call for Mr. Steed on his private line.'

McKay lifted the switch. 'Can you transfer it, Jean? Mr. Steed and I are in conference. He will take the call in here.'

'No.' Steed's voice screamed out. 'Tell her to leave it.'

McKay looked up in amazement at the violence of Steed's reaction. He frowned. 'As you wish, John,' he murmured quietly.

Steed shrugged apologetically. 'Private business, Tom . . . sorry,' he mumbled thickly. He stood up quickly, turning to the door.

McKay stared after him, grave concern showing on his face. The man was showing unusual signs of tension . . . and something else, which McKay could not quite identify. It was almost as if Steed was hiding some guilty secret . . .

McKay pushed the half-formed thought from his mind as the door slammed shut. He had his own troubles to worry about.

Steed ran all the way to his office, bursting in and

snatching up the telephone. 'Yes, Steed,' he blurted out, breathlessly.

Gambit's voice came over the line. 'You sound a little jumpy this morning, Steed.'

Steed's shoulders slumped. 'What is it, Gambit?' he asked in a weary voice.

'Have you heard from Purdey?' Gambit asked, his voice deliberately calm.

The totally unexpected shock threw Steed off balance. His knuckles blanched as he squeezed the telephone receiver in his fist. 'Why? Why do you ask,' he barked savagely.

Gambit was equally shocked by the intensity of Steed's reaction. 'My, we really *are* on edge this morning,' he chided gently. 'Didn't she say goodbye to you, either?'

Steed rallied himself. 'What about Purdey?' he asked.

'I just wondered if she arrived at her mother's safely,' Gambit murmured down the phone, trying to sound unconcerned. He had decided not to tell Steed about the earlier attack, knowing how much the man worried about Purdey's welfare.

Steed's brain raced. In the back of his mind, he heard Packer's insistent voice; 'Don't tell anyone . . . especially not Gambit. Headstrong . . . the sort to rush in and get her killed for sure'.

Steed forced a carefree laugh. 'Yes, she's fine,' he lied. 'She called me last night, as a matter of fact. Her mother is the same as ever . . . cheerfully neurotic.'

'Oh. That's alright then.' Gambit seemed pacified. 'I just wondered. Game of squash this evening, Steed?'

'No. I'm busy,' Steed answered curtly.

'Oh.' Gambit was lost for words, taken aback by Steed's abrupt manner. 'Goodbye then, Steed.'

'Goodbye.' Steed replaced the receiver, then, on afterthought, lifted it again and left it lying on his desk. He

walked out of the office, to resume his interrupted conversation with McKay.

He passed Spelman in the corridor. On a sudden impulse, Steed turned, stopping in his tracks. 'Seen anything of Purdey today?' he asked, in a deliberately casual manner.

Spelman turned back, shaking his head. 'No-one will see her for a few days. She left yesterday to visit her mother.'

'Oh.' Steed acted surprised. 'Did you see her go?'

'Yes.' Spelman nodded. 'I think I was about the last person to see her, as it happens.'

'Did she have a suitcase with her,' Steed pressed.

Spelman thought for a moment, finally shaking his head. 'No, come to think of it, I don't think she did.'

'Right.' Steed walked on, weighing the new snippets of information in his head. No suitcase . . . it suggested that she had intended to return to her flat before leaving. It was more than possible that there was where the abduction had taken place. It was worth investigation, Steed decided.

He stopped in his tracks, only a few yards short of McKay's office. Turning, he walked briskly back towards the elevator and dropped to the ground floor.

He paused, briefly, by the reception desk on his way out of the building. 'If Tom McKay asks for me, tell him I had to go home,' he said to the girl on duty.

'Any particular reason, Mr. Steed?'

Steed nodded. 'Just tell him the oysters started fighting again . . . and they won,' he muttered cryptically. He turned on his heel and strode out to hail a taxi.

Steed stared around the wreckage of Purdey's flat apprehensively. The kidnappers, whoever they were, had no qualms about violence, that was obvious. A fleeting smile crossed Steed's lips as he imagined Purdey giving a good account of herself.

The telephone rang unexpectedly. Steed froze, staring at it for some moments in indecision. Finally, he strode across the room and snatched it up.

'You won't find any clues there, Steed,' came Packer's patronising voice. 'Nothing which will lead you to us, I'm afraid. Do you have the money, by the way?'

Steed was completely taken by surprise, but he rallied quickly. 'Yes, I have the money ready, as requested.'

'Good. Then I shall give you your instructions for delivery,' Packer murmured. 'You will take a taxi to Edge Street, alighting at the North end. You will walk down on the right-hand side until you come to number 20. Outside, there will be two dustbins. You are to throw the money, wrapped in newspaper, into the right-hand bin. Leave the area immediately. You will be under constant surveillance. Any attempt on your part to remain in the area, or make any efforts to follow up our recovery of the money, and Purdey will die. Do you understand?'

'Yes, I understand. I'll do exactly as you say,' Steed said, meekly.

'Excellent,' Packer gloated. 'Please set out on your mission in exactly ten minutes from now, Mr. Steed.'

'When will you let Purdey go free?' Steed asked, but Packer had already hung up.

Sighing heavily, Steed pulled a plain envelope from his inside pocket and extracted its contents. He began to count out the money carefully.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Packer was grinning broadly as he replaced the telephone in its cradle. Vernon glanced over at him, one eyebrow lifted fractionally. 'Is he going to follow instructions?'

'To the letter,' Packer replied, satisfaction in his voice. 'I don't think Mr. Steed is going to give us any trouble at all.' He turned to Purdey. 'Really, my dear, I cannot understand how on earth your friend Steed ever established a reputation for being devious. He seems a very predictable man to me. He certainly always manages to be exactly where we expect him to be. Very considerate of him, don't you think?'

Purdey smiled defiantly. 'He'll fool you soon enough,' she said. 'You're no match for John Steed. He'll show you up for the amateurs you are.'

Packer ignored the insult. 'Your faith in Steed is admirable . . . but totally unfounded,' he assured her. 'Believe me, before this little affair is over, you may well be feeling more than a little disappointed with friend Steed.' He paused for a reflective chuckle. 'Yes indeed, a great many people are going to be very disappointed with him, as a matter of fact.'

'Except us, of course,' Vernon put in, from across the room. 'We will have every cause to feel grateful to John Steed, won't we?'

Packer smiled patronisingly. 'We shall indeed, Vernon. Mister Steed is following his instructions to the letter, so far. I really do think that everything is going to work out just splendidly.'

'Shall I go and pick up the money yet?' Vernon asked.

Packer nodded. 'Why not?' He gestured towards Marvin. 'Take Marvin with you, just in case . . . and don't forget to check with Symonds that Steed has completely left the area before you move in. Even at this late stage, he might just decide to be a lonesome hero.'

Vernon smiled thinly. 'Don't worry, I won't take any chances.' He looked over to Marvin. 'Ready, then?'

The huge man lumbered over to his side, waiting as patiently as a trained pet.

Purdey grinned, despite the seriousness of her situation. 'Tell 'em about the honey, mummy,' she muttered under her breath. The joke fell upon stony ground.

Packer looked over at Purdey after the two men had left the room. 'Well, we shall soon see just how much Steed thinks of you,' he murmured thoughtfully.

'And then?' Purdey asked.

Packer shrugged. 'And then . . . we shall take the plan on to its next stage,' he said simply.

Purdey regarded the man piercingly. 'Even if Steed delivers the money as ordered . . . you're not going to let me go, are you?'

Packer smiled. 'What an astute girl you are,' he complimented her. 'No, we are not going to let you go. As I said before, the money is nothing . . . a test run, nothing more. We have to see how far Steed will go along with us. We have to push him further and further, pile on the pressure, make him sweat. And then, eventually . . .' He broke off, tantalisingly.

Purdey glared at him, realising that he had been playing with her, piling up torment with sadistic pleasure. Packer was not going to give her any real clues to the eventual outcome of his plan, whatever it was. His pretence of revealing the plot had been only a tease. Still, if she could keep him talking, play along with him, there was just the chance that she might trick him into revealing something which could help her.

'You'll need to have a few aces up your sleeve if you want to push Steed any further,' she said flatly. 'He might have gone this far to protect me . . . but when he realises you don't intend to release me, that will be the end of the line.'

Packer shook his head. 'No, I don't think so,' he said quietly. 'I think Steed has quite a way to go yet.' He

crossed to a filing cabinet, opening one of the drawers. 'And anyway, we do have a few aces left to play,' he announced, extracting a gun wrapped in a transparent plastic bag. 'Recognise this?'

Purdey stared at the gun. 'It's a standard Service revolver,' she said.

Packer nodded happily. 'But no ordinary revolver,' he assured her. 'This just happens to be Steed's own, personal gun. We managed to switch firearms on him while he was at the IRS centre.'

For the first time, Purdey was utterly stunned. The implication of Packer's boast was incredible, almost unbelievable. 'Then you have someone inside the Department? A traitor?'

Packer gloated over her shocked expression. 'You *are* a clever girl,' he said, grinning. 'No wonder Steed thinks so highly of you.'

He re-crossed to the filing cabinet, tossing the wrapped gun back into the open drawer. Dipping his hand in after it, he pulled out another small object, holding it gently between his finger and thumb and waving it suggestively in the air. 'I had to make sure we were alone before doing this,' he murmured, in a deceptively friendly tone. 'Wouldn't have done to let poor Marvin see it. As I told you, he is really quite a gentle soul. Far too squeamish about such things. Besides, I think in his dim, animal-like way, he quite fancies you.'

Purdey's blood ran cold as she identified the slim, tortoise-shelled object which Packer held as an old-fashioned cut-throat razor. She cringed back as he advanced towards her, flipping the weapon open with a deft movement of his thumb. His face was deadly serious now, the corners of his mouth pulled into a cruel, evil line. His eyes were cold, dead, like those of a snake poised for the kill.

Purdey's eyes were riveted on the wicked, glinting blade as Packer stood over her cowering body. 'What are you going to do?' she managed to croak huskily, as the man began to stoop over her, reaching towards her neck.

Packer's face was quite expressionless as he answered her. 'Steed is not a man to be easily pushed,' he murmured. 'It will take a lot of pressure to make him crack, comply with what we will be asking of him. To paraphrase the old saying . . . a visual reminder is worth a thousand threats.'

Packer's free hand closed around Purdey's slim neck in a vice-like grip. 'Now, please try not to struggle,' he warned her. 'We don't want any accidents, do we? I'm not a great expert with this little tool . . . prefer an electric shaver, myself.'

Purdey's mouth opened, and a scream half-formed in her throat, only to be stifled by fear as the razor's gleaming edge moved across her face, mere centimetres in front of her eyes. Above the mad pounding of her own heart, she could hear Packer's dull, expressionless voice mumbling on.

'Now just try to keep still . . . this won't take long. I'm just going to carve off a little piece of you . . . something which John Steed cannot fail to recognise. Not much, you understand. Just a token, a dramatic little suggestion of worse things to come. A little piece of Purdey . . . in return for the money.'

Purdey's scream finally broke as Packer's hand moved and the razor made one short, slashing cut.

CHAPTER NINE

Clive Walters was unusually grim-faced as he tapped on the door of Tom McKay's private office and entered, upon

the curtly-uttered invitation. His first words to his superior were basic, delivered in a heavy voice. 'We have serious trouble, sir.'

'Trouble? We always have trouble,' McKay muttered, looking up. 'What is it this time?'

Again, Walters didn't bother to waste words. 'Collins is dead,' he said flatly.

McKay's face registered little emotion. It was a clever act, one which he had perfected over the years. To hold down a job like his, a man had to appear cool, perhaps ruthless, under the most trying circumstances. Espionage was a savage and often unpleasant business. People got killed. It didn't do anything for morale if the man at the top appeared soft when the person killed was a fellow-agent. Even if he was a personal friend as well.

'How?' he asked, in a businesslike voice.

'His neck was broken . . . snapped like a rotten twig,' Walters said. 'The blow was delivered from behind, by an expert.'

McKay nodded thoughtfully. 'So they're on to us,' he murmured.

'Looks like it, sir,' Walters agreed. 'He was on routine surveillance when it happened.'

McKay stood up, crossing his office to the inner door. Opening it, he called softly in to his personal secretary. 'Bring in the current file on Project Postbox, will you? And Martin Collins' personal file as well.' He returned to his desk, sitting down and glancing up at Walters. 'There's not much doubt about it now, is there? There's a rotten apple . . . even in this tighter than tight security barrel.'

Walters nodded unhappily. He shifted his feet awkwardly. 'There's something else . . . much worse. You're not going to like it, sir.'

McKay frowned. 'What is it?'

Walters looked awkward and embarrassed. 'I think

you'd better see for yourself, sir . . . make your own deductions,' he muttered haltingly. 'Collins' camera was untouched, lying by his body when he was found. I've had the film in it rushed through processing. It's all set up in the projection room. I've run it through once . . . alone. What's on it is nasty, sir . . . very nasty indeed.'

McKay nodded thoughtfully as his secretary entered, carrying the two files he had requested. He spread them out on his desk, then looked back at Walters. 'Give me a few minutes to go through these and refresh my memory. I'll come down to the projection room when I'm ready. In the meantime, make sure nobody else gets into that room and sees the film. The less people involved the better.'

Walters nodded. 'I'll see to it,' he promised. He turned and let himself out.

Only after the man had gone did McKay allow grief for the dead agent to show on his face. He sighed heavily as he opened Martin Collins' file and began to read the last few weeks of a friend's life.

McKay's face was drawn and strained as the short piece of film ran out and the screen went dark. 'Run it through again,' he said, in a strangely clipped, strangled voice. He waited as Walters rewound the film and started it up again.

On the screen, John Steed walked furtively down the pavement of Edge Street. Pausing outside a dark green house, the door clearly numbered 20, he delved into his pocket, extracting a small bundle of newspaper. Moving to one of the nearby dustbins, Steed lifted the lid and deposited the bundle inside. Then, with a shifty glance all around him, he turned and walked away again.

The film stopped again.

'Switch it off,' McKay said wearily.

Walters obeyed. In the absolute silence which followed the faint whirring of the projector, he could hear the heaviness of McKay's breathing. 'I said you weren't going to like it,' he muttered. 'There's absolutely no doubt, of course?'

'That it's Steed? No, none at all,' McKay replied miserably. 'The point is . . . what on earth was he doing there? Steed knew nothing about Operation Postbox . . .' He broke off, clutching at straws. '. . . Or did he? We both know Steed . . . plays his own game. *Could* he have found out about Postbox? Been following up a private lead?'

Walters shook his head sadly. 'There's no way, sir . . . I've already double-checked that,' he replied. Operation Postbox was rigidly restricted to internal staff only. The only field agents which knew of that house in Edge Street were those directly involved in surveillance. That was myself and Collins. There is no way that Steed could have even known of the existence of Operation Postbox . . . let alone have become involved in it.'

'Damn,' McKay said explosively. 'There must be a logical explanation of what Steed was doing there. There has to be. The alternative is unthinkable.'

'I agree with you, sir,' Walters muttered, with genuine concern. 'Steed is the best man we've got . . . almost like a father-figure to everyone in the Department. Accepting that he has turned traitor would be like waking up and finding Nelson's Column gone.'

McKay sighed. 'Yes, it's utterly preposterous,' he muttered. 'But we have to face up to realities. If Steed *has* turned rogue, we cannot afford to take any chances. There's a lot at stake here.'

'Shall I pull him in for questioning?' Walters asked.

McKay considered for several moments, finally shaking his head slowly. 'We have far too much to lose,' he said

after a while. 'We know that house in Edge Street is a key connection point for a cell of hostile agents. They use it as a central pick-up and drop-off point . . . a sort of private post office. Potentially, these agents could be the most efficient and deadly espionage set-up to have threatened this country's security in the past ten years. We cannot afford to let them go. If we pull Steed in, and he is connected, we could blow the whole thing and have everyone scuttling for cover. On the other hand, if Steed has just blundered into this thing by pure accident, it might be best to let events take their natural course for a while.'

'He'll be put under surveillance, of course?' Walters asked.

'Of course,' McKay muttered. 'But it must be done with the utmost discretion. Steed must not suspect for an instant that we doubt him, or his loyalties. If we are right . . . and I personally pray we are not . . . it will tip him off. If we are wrong, and he finds out, the fact that we suspected him could shatter the man's morale, ruin him. John Steed is a proud man . . . a gentleman, one of the old school. If he thought he were not fully trusted, he might easily hand in his resignation on the spot. If he is still true to us, he is the one man we cannot afford to lose.'

Walters nodded. 'I understand, sir. I'll take care of it personally . . . and I will be perfectly discreet.'

'Yes, I'm sure you will,' McKay muttered. 'But also be careful. Steed has always been a dangerous man on our side . . . if he is on the opposite side of the fence, he could be even more deadly. Don't underestimate him, and under no circumstances must there be any direct confrontation. There could be no half-measures, you realise that?'

'Oh yes.' Walters nodded sombrely. 'If it came to the crunch, it would have to be me or him.'

'Exactly.' McKay looked equally grim. 'If you come face to face with John Steed, and he is a traitor . . . you'll have to be quick off the mark to kill him before he kills you.'

CHAPTER TEN

Steed paced his study nervously, glancing at his watch every few minutes. It was late evening, more than six hours since he had dropped off the ransom money as specified . . . and still he had received no message from Purdey's kidnappers. He was worried.

The telephone rang. Steed sprinted across the room towards it, snatching it up. 'Yes?'

He heard the shrill pips of a public telephone box, followed by the dull clank of an inserted coin. Packer's well-modulated tones came over the wire. 'You did very well, Mr. Steed.'

'I followed instructions exactly . . . did everything you asked,' Steed blurted out. 'Now what about Purdey? You have the money.'

'Oh, the money doesn't matter. We'll send it back to you,' Packer informed him casually. 'And as far as Purdey is concerned . . . go and look outside your front door, Steed.'

The line went dead. Puzzled, Steed held it for several seconds before replacing the receiver in its cradle. Then, suddenly galvanised into action by an acute sense of impending danger, he sprinted from the room towards the front door, flinging it open.

In the dim light, the shadowy figure of a woman stood at the foot of the steps.

'Purdey?' Steed cried out, his voice breaking with

relief and worry at one and the same time.

The woman walked up the steps, coming into clear view. 'Even if I wasn't jealous, you seem determined to make me so,' Suzy Pilkington murmured, a trifle petulantly.

Steed's heart sank. His face showed no welcoming warmth as Suzy walked up to the door. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out.

Suzy spoke instead. 'I don't usually pursue a man, John. But I am, quite unashamedly. The other night . . . I realised that I had absolutely no right to react the way I did. Your work is important to you, I see that now. It has to come first . . . before pleasure.'

Steed was stunned. Could Suzy be involved in the terrible plot which had engulfed him? He could not believe it. He stared, fascinated, at a large brown envelope which she held in her hand.

Suzy Pilkington saw his eyes upon it and realised that it was somehow important to him. She waved it coquettishly under his nose. 'Is this what you're looking for? You can have it . . . in exchange for a firm dinner date. Tomorrow evening?'

Rudely, Steed reached out and snatched the envelope from her grasp. Taken aback, Suzy began to mutter an explanation. 'It was on your bottom step . . . I picked it up.'

Steed wasn't listening to her. His fingers tearing at the flap of the envelope, he had already started to move back inside the house. Suzy followed him uncertainly, her face betraying deep hurt. 'John . . . even mavericks show some feelings, some affection? Good manners, at least.'

Her words fell upon deaf ears. Shaking the contents of the envelope out in his palm, Steed stared in horror.

Angry as she was, Suzy Pilkington could not fail to be

moved by the obvious shock in Steed's eyes. She walked up to him, laying her fingers gently around his arm, squeezing comfortingly. 'John, what is it? Are you in some kind of trouble?'

The telephone began to ring in the study. Disengaging himself from Suzy's clutch, Steed ran to answer it.

'Just a few locks of the lovely lady's hair . . . that's all *this* time,' Packer's voice informed him. Despite the apparent jocularly of his tone, the man left no doubts as to the nature of the implied threat behind the message. 'A harmless reminder,' Packer went on. 'Just to help you make up your mind about co-operating with us for a little longer.'

'What more do you want?' Steed's voice was shaken with anger and exasperation. The intolerable pressures which had been building up were beginning to have their intended effect, tearing Steed's usually ice-cool nerves to shreds.

There was still to be no let-up. Packer pressed ahead with his plans to keep Steed constantly on the hop, unsure of what was coming next, totally disorientated. 'The public telephone box . . . in two minutes,' Packer hissed, and hung up.

Dropping the telephone, Steed rushed out into the hallway, where Suzy Pilkington still stood, uncertainly. Steed grasped her by the shoulders and pushed her, unceremoniously, towards the front door, almost dragging her down the steps. 'Got to rush . . . more urgent business,' he hissed, breathlessly. 'But I'll call you, Suzy . . . I promise I'll call you.'

Suzy Pilkington gazed after him sadly as he left her in the drive and ran to the garage. 'I very much doubt if I shall be answering,' she muttered under her breath. She watched Steed roar out of the garage and take off down the drive like a formula one racer. Only when the tail of

the Rover had disappeared round the end of the drive did she begin to walk, slowly, towards her own car.

Steed brought the Rover to a skidding halt, throwing open the door and sprinting across the quiet country road towards the empty telephone box. Inside it, the phone was already ringing. As Steed reached the box and hauled the door open, it fell silent.

'Damn!' Steed slammed a clenched fist against the side of the coin-box, his nerves stretched to quivering point. Hopelessly, he gazed at the mute telephone for several seconds, feeling totally dispirited. At last, it began to ring again. Steed snatched it up.

'We nearly missed you, Steed,' said Packer in a gloating voice. 'That would have been a pity.'

'Just tell me what you want.' Steed's voice was a scream.

'Go back home. Look under the front passenger seat of your Bentley,' Packer murmured, hanging up yet again.

Steed pushed open the door of the telephone box wearily, dragging himself back to the car. Hardly trusting himself to drive safely, he headed home at a snails pace, driving the car straight into the open garage. He climbed out of the Rover, crossing to the vintage Bentley and lifting the front seat.

There was a small, oblong box beneath it. Gingerly, Steed picked it up, carrying it very gently across towards the light to examine it in greater detail.

It was a small tape-recorder. Carrying it into the house, Steed placed the machine on his desk and stabbed the 'play' button. Packer's evil, gloating chuckle assaulted his ears.

'Enjoying yourself, Steed? Getting plenty of exercise? Now let us get down to business, shall we? As you must realise, the business with the money was just a trial . . . a

dummy run. We needed to know how far you would go to save Purdey . . . and now we do know. All the way, it seems, Steed. Well that is very good, Steed, because that's exactly how far you *will* have to go. All the way. Now this is what we want you to do . . . ?

Steed snapped the recorder off. Before facing the new demands, he needed a drink – desperately. He crossed to the cocktail cabinet and poured himself a large measure of Remy Martin. Cradling the brandy glass in his hand, he returned to the tape recorder and switched it on again, listening intently to Packer's voice.

'The Allied Attack Plans . . . that's what we are after,' the disembodied voice informed him. 'We want you to photograph the relevant documents and bring them to us. Precise instructions for the delivery will be sent to you later. Right now, you will need the necessary hardware to accomplish your task. You will find everything required in the top right-hand drawer of your bureau. Move quickly, Steed. None of us has much time to spare . . . especially Purdey.'

The tape ran on soundlessly. Switching it off, Steed crossed the study to his bureau and opened the top right-hand drawer. Nestling neatly inside was a small microfilm camera. Picking it up carefully, Steed ran his expert eyes over it quickly, establishing its origin of manufacture as East Germany. That, if nothing else, gave him a precise clue as to the loyalties and motivation of the people he was dealing with.

Placing the camera down on a nearby coffee table, Steed sat down to finish his brandy and think. It was all too uncanny, too precisely planned to leave any room for doubt. The abductors' knowledge of his every move, their ability to predict his reactions and whereabouts at any second, the ease with which they had planted the tape recorder in his car and the camera inside his house. The

unnerving facts could only add up to one thing; that the person masterminding the plan had inside knowledge of Steed's character, the exact nature of his job and its execution.

Steed racked his brains, pondering all possible moves. His initial reaction, upon hearing the true ransom demanded for Purdey, had been to notify the Department at once. He had been willing to play along with the kidnappers as long as only money appeared to be involved. Now that national security had become involved, Steed's loyalty outweighed his natural concern for Purdey. Normally, he would have not hesitated in making his choice, for no single individual could be regarded as that precious.

Tom McKay's words buzzed in his head. 'There's a whisper, Steed . . . not quite yet a shout . . . we have a traitor, right here in the very heart of the Department . . . It could be anyone . . . even me.'

The full implication of McKay's words registered dully in Steed's mind. At the same time, he became acutely aware of the loneliness and vulnerability of his own position. He was out on a limb, totally unprotected and with absolutely no-one to trust, to turn to for help. Gambit, Spelman, Walters, McKay . . . even Purdey herself! If there was a traitor inside the Department, it could be at any level, for the stakes would necessarily be incredibly high.

With this realisation came a certain new calmness. At last, Steed saw things in perspective, was able to identify and understand his own role. It was much like a complicated parlour game, in which each player had to play off one character against another, against a background of illogical doubts. One had to assume that every other player in the game was guilty, and base elementary thoughts upon the single fact of one's own innocence. At

the same time, each player had also to accept that all other participants might be equally confident of their own innocence, and acting upon the same rules of play. All except one, that was! Only the guilty party held the single linking piece of the entire puzzle . . . and the essence of the game was to remain undetected whilst one's fellow-players destroyed each other.

With sudden clarity, Steed realised that he would have to continue playing along with the kidnappers, remain alone on his limb. By doing so, Steed risked being cut down at any moment, and when he fell, Purdey would doubtless fall with him.

So it became a question of two individuals, not one. The change in odds did not affect the pure logic of the decision; it remained exactly the same. There was no choice at all. He alone stood the faintest chance of exposing the turncoat and preserving national security. A lesser man may well have baulked from the prospect of self-sacrifice and throwing a close friend to the wolves at the same time. Steed did not. He *could* not.

As Packer and his colleagues had known all along, Steed was just not that sort of man.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The security corridor was dark and silent. Outside the main fire-doors, the guard sat back on his stool, his head lolling against the wall. He seemed half-asleep, as though stupefied by the routine boredom of his lonely job. Night watch was a duty no-one seemed to relish, for nothing ever happened. Without full security passes, and classified information of the electronic codes needed to open the outer doors, not so much as a mouse could penetrate this

deep into the heart of the Department. The guard was almost superfluous in a way . . . just a concession to the need for a human element, a flesh and blood fail-safe.

Nevertheless, the guard was instantly awake and alert as the sound of softly-approaching footsteps echoed along the corridor. He jumped to his feet, his hand springing to his side holster to close around the heavy butt of his service Webley. As the gun slipped neatly free of the open holster, he threw himself into the centre of the corridor, knees slightly bent in a defensive posture. A large figure loomed out of the darkness, vaguely illuminated in the dim pool of violet light cast by the fire warning sign over the door.

The guard relaxed, recognising the suspected intruder. His hand returned the gun to its holster before extending outwards to receive the proffered security pass.

'Oh, it's you, Mr. Steed, sir,' the guard murmured, with an easy, relieved smile. 'Don't often see you in here this late.'

Steed returned the smile. 'An emergency,' he said, giving away nothing. 'Can't work to the clock on this job, I'm afraid.'

The guard cast a cursory glance at Steed's pass before handing it back to him. He stepped to the door, pushing it open politely. 'Goodnight, sir.'

'Goodnight, Jim,' Steed answered. He made it a point to know all the security staff by their first names. He also knew their habits. Jim Mason would call for a relief in exactly fifteen minutes time, so that he could go to the coffee machine for a break and a strictly prohibited cigarette. The two men would not meet again that evening.

Steed strolled through the open door, continuing down the internal corridor. Mason returned to his stool and sat down as Steed's footsteps faded away. He glanced down

at his watch, reflecting that it was nearly time to take his customary break.

Steed slowed his pace as he came to a bend in the corridor. Somewhat furtively, he peered round to the right, his eyes seeking out any tell-tale chinks of light showing from under any of the many doors. There were none. Satisfied, Steed turned the corner and continued along the new corridor at a steady pace, until he came to a halt outside Tom McKay's private office.

Pressing himself to the door, Steed fished in his pocket for his small bunch of top-security keys. Choosing one, he slipped it into the lock, turning it slightly to the left and then pressing the small button on the door handle five times. Only then, when the in-built electric device had freed the door-lock did he complete turning the key. With no clanging of alarm bells and no flashing lights, the door sighed open.

Steed walked in, closing the door softly behind him. In the darkness, he paused for a second, taking his bearings from his intimate knowledge of the office and the position of its furniture. His memory served as an excellent map and torch. Neatly sidestepping McKay's umbrella stand, he walked around the left-hand side of the desk, reached over the leather-backed chair behind it and let his fingers close neatly over the switch of the small desk lamp. Steed snapped it on, angling the beam of light away from the door and across the room towards the wall-safe.

Lips pursed grimly, Steed stepped across to it and curled his thumb and forefinger over the combination dial. He began to turn it gingerly, counting the faint clicks.

Theoretically, only McKay knew the safe combination. As an added security precaution, it was changed at least once a week. Even an agent of Steed's stature had only

access to McKay's office, not the safe. Against this, only an agent of Steed's stature and experience would have subconsciously counted the tell-tale clicks on his earlier visit to the office. This fact would serve him well now. With seven expert adjustments, Steed dialled the correct combination code, noting the louder click of the lock snapping into the free position with a thin smile of satisfaction. Grasping the handle firmly, Steed pulled the safe door open and peered inside.

The manilla envelope containing the Allied Attack Plans was there, just as Steed had known it would be. Pausing only to pull a clean handkerchief from his top pocket and wrap it around his right hand, Steed reached inside the safe and pulled the envelope gently out. He carried it back to the desk, laying it down gently. Still using the handkerchief, he opened it and pulled its contents out on to the desk top, laying them in a strict numerical pattern. Steed knew McKay's meticulousness well. The man would have deliberately taken the pages out of their normal sequence, as his own, personal security device.

Satisfied that he had avoided that particular little trap, Steed re-adjusted the angle of the desk lamp so that the pages were bathed in its illumination. He delved into his pocket, pulling out the microfilm camera which had been planted upon him. Quickly, but carefully, he photographed each sheet in order before returning the camera to his pocket. Collecting the papers up in their correct order, Steed returned them to the envelope, giving it a complete wipe-over with the handkerchief as a final precaution before turning back to the safe.

Suddenly, he froze, his ears pricking. The faintest sound had alerted him, triggered off his hair-trigger responses to danger. Almost as though with a sixth sense, Steed suddenly knew that there was someone outside in

the corridor, his hand already locked around the door-handle to McKay's office.

Steed's cunning mind erupted into action, galvanising his body into a blur of speed. Throwing the manilla envelope back into place in the safe, Steed whirled to the desk, his fingers seeking out a small red book and flipping it open. He appeared to be engrossed in studying it when the door suddenly burst open and Mike Gambit sprang into the room, crouched down with his gun in his hand.

'Steed!' Gambit's voice was a mixture of surprise and relief. 'Thank God you were standing in the beam of that light. I might have shot first and asked questions later.'

Steed looked up, forcing one of his careless smiles. 'Always did say you tended to be a bit trigger-happy, Mike.'

Gambit slipped the gun back into its shoulder-holster, regarding Steed curiously. 'What are you doing here? Have I caught you dipping your fingers into the till?'

Steed laughed off the joke. 'No such luck. Did you think it was going to be one of your nights for glory?'

Gambit smiled ruefully. 'Saw a light under the door ... just wondered. Had to make sure.'

Steed nodded approvingly. 'The retraining centre seems to have done you a power of good. Honed up your reflexes.'

Steed's smile never wavered, but his keen eyes were scrutinising Gambit's face carefully. The man was still a little dubious, perhaps suspicious of Steed's presence. It showed, even under the careless banter they had been conducting.

Hesitantly, Gambit confirmed this by putting his thoughts into words. 'What *are* you doing here, Steed?'

Steed gestured to the red book on the desk, and flipped over a couple more pages. 'I popped in to consult Tom's

desk diary,' he murmured. There's supposed to be a V.I.P. visit sometime in the next few days. I wanted to make sure of the date and time.'

'And you wanted to make sure you had a clean collar on?' Gambit queried.

Steed grinned wickedly. 'I wanted to make sure I miss it,' he said.

It was this last joke which seemed to allay Gambit's last remaining suspicions. His face cleared. Now his smile was relaxed, and genuine. 'Good idea,' he said, beginning to move around to Steed's side to look at the diary for himself.

Steed's fixed smile wavered for just a fraction of a second as he remembered the open safe door behind him. He had been shielding it with his body from Gambit's line of vision. Now, as the man approached, he would see it and be instantly alerted. Steed thought quickly. 'There's nothing about it on the notice board outside, is there?'

The ploy worked. Gambit stopped in his tracks, turning back towards the door. 'I'll take a look.'

As Gambit turned his back, Steed whirled and closed the safe door, covering the noise with a shout. 'No, it's all right, Mike. It's here, I've found it.'

Gambit turned back as Steed closed the desk diary and slid it back into its correct position. 'Buy you a drink, Steed?'

Steed shook his head. 'Sorry Mike. In a bit of a rush.'

Gambit grinned knowingly. 'Got to rescue some damsel in distress?' he quipped.

Steed was thrown for a second, but he rallied well. He let out a secretive laugh. 'Something like that. It's all go, being a knight on a white charger.'

Gambit grinned ruefully, betraying a slight jealousy. 'Yes, I'm sure it is. Well, if you're sure I can't tempt you ...'

Steed shook his head again. 'No, really Mike. Thanks all the same, anyway.'

Gambit nodded. 'Well, goodnight, Steed.'

'Goodnight Mike.' Steed played for time by extracting his own diary from his pocket, fumbling for a pen and pretending to jot down the information he had supposedly just uncovered.

Gambit moved towards the doorway. 'I'll leave you to lock up, then.'

'Right.' Steed continued to write laboriously as Gambit ducked out through the door, pulling it almost shut behind him. As the man's footsteps receded down the corridor, Steed took a deep breath. It had been a close call. Relaxing slightly, he ran his eyes over McKay's desk, making sure that everything was perfectly in its place. Using the handkerchief, he painstakingly re-set the desk lamp to its original position, then wiped the shade, stem and switch with light, expert strokes. Turning again to the safe, he cleaned the handle and the combination dial, finishing off with a casual flick as though the handkerchief were a feather duster. Satisfied that he had left no fingerprints or traces of his entry, Steed stabbed his covered finger over the light switch and crossed the room again in darkness. He closed the door behind him, locking it and re-activating the electronic security device.

A few seconds later, he was walking back down the corridor, patting the tiny camera in his jacket pocket. Everything had gone smoothly, despite the unexpected intrusion of Gambit. The man trusted him, and any suspicions had been allayed. It was highly unlikely that Gambit would see fit to mention Steed's nocturnal visit to McKay, and even if it did happen, Steed had covered his tracks. There really was a V.I.P. visit looming up, in four days time to be exact. Tom McKay might resent Steed's intrusion into his private office, but he would not

necessarily find it in any way suspicious, or even out of character. Steed's loathing of protocol and official functions was well-known. He was a loner, a man who liked to play his own game, but his own rules.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Vernon glanced nervously at his watch. 'He should have got the stuff and reached home by now.'

Packer nodded in agreement, smiling with calm assurance. 'Let's find out, shall we?' He stood, crossing to the telephone and dialling Steed's number. It rang for several minutes, with no answer. Looking slightly surprised and disappointed, Packer began to lower the receiver back into the cradle. Fractionally before he dropped the telephone, the line opened with a click. Packer brought the receiver up to his ear quickly. 'Steed? Did you get the photographs?'

'Yes, I got them,' Steed answered brusquely. 'I was just developing the film.'

Packer chuckled delightedly. 'How thoughtful of you, Steed. That's what I call sterling service. Glossy prints, I trust?'

Steed ignored the sarcasm. 'What about instructions for delivery?' he asked. 'How soon can I get all this over with and see Purdey safe?'

Packer clicked his tongue reprovingly, recognising Steed's conversation as a time-consuming ploy, intended to give him time to make a telephone trace. 'Really, Steed, give me a little more credit. I told you . . . no long calls. You will receive your instructions soon enough, I assure you.' He dropped the receiver abruptly, turning to Vernon with a beaming smile of satisfaction. 'Yes, he has the

plans. Everything is progressing nice and smoothly.'

From across the room, Purdey interjected. 'Fools,' she spat out contemptuously. 'Do you really imagine for a moment that Steed will go through with this farce? Do you honestly think he would betray his country for an individual?'

Packer's smile did not waver. 'Ah, but you're not an individual,' he pointed out, slowly crossing the room towards her. 'You are Purdey . . . and Steed is very fond of you.' He broke off, reaching down to stroke the tips of his fingers over Purdey's slim neck. 'And I must say I don't blame him at all,' he finished, with a suggestive leer.

Purdey shook herself away from his touch with a shudder of distaste. 'He'll still fool you . . . you wait and see,' she insisted, with more assurance than she really felt. It did begin to seem as though Steed was playing right into their hands. The thought was a disquieting one.

Packer's next words really sent a shiver down her spine. He moved away from her, laughing out loud. 'Anyway, it doesn't really matter any more. Your friend Steed has already gone past the point of no return.' He delved into his pocket, pulling out a buff envelope with Steed's address clearly printed upon it. 'Steed has already put his head firmly inside the noose . . . and this will help tighten it. You might say he is already a hung man.'

Crossing to the filing cabinet, Packer pulled out a wad of banknotes and began to stuff them into the envelope. 'Your supposed ransom money,' he explained, licking the flap of the envelope and sealing it. He waved it in the air towards Vernon. 'Pop down to the main post office, will you?'

The door opened quietly. 'I'll do that. It will give me the utmost pleasure to do so,' a quiet voice murmured.

Purdey was unable to stop a gasp of shocked surprise as the newcomer strolled into the room. She gaped at him

blankly for several seconds before spitting out his name. 'Spelman!'

Paul Spelman's eyes twinkled as he savoured Purdey's shocked reaction. 'Hello, Purdey. I hope my friends are treating you with true Slavonic hospitality.'

Purdey's eyes opened even wider with amazement. Seeing it, Spelman chuckled even more delightedly. 'Oh yes,' he went on. 'I wasn't always Paul Spelman. I was christened Ivan Spelovitch.'

'A sleeper!' Purdey gasped.

Spelman nodded. 'A veritable Rip van Winkle,' he agreed. 'It's taken me fifteen years to rise to such an elevated position within the Department. Fifteen years, and a savage dedication to the job and my foster-country.'

'And to think I introduced you to my mother,' Purdey muttered with scorn, failing to evoke any emotion in Spelman other than greater amusement.

Spelman reached out to take the envelope containing the ransom money from Packer's hands. 'Better get moving if we're to make sure of the first post,' he muttered. He turned briefly back to Purdey. 'I'll see you first thing in the morning, try to look your best. We have a very busy day ahead of us tomorrow.'

On this cryptic note, Spelman exited, leaving Purdey more puzzled and frightened than ever. Puzzled because she was even more in the dark about what was going on, and frightened because there seemed no way now that Spelman could allow her to live, knowing his true identity.

Spelman was true to his word. Before the birds had finished singing their dawn chorus, he breezed into the warehouse again, looking extremely pleased with himself.

Purdey, shaking herself awake from an uncomfortable night's sleep, glowered at him as he smiled towards her.

'Your big day, Ivan?' she murmured sarcastically, using his real name. 'Hoping to sell the Allied Attack Plans for lots of lovely roubles?'

Spelman let it slide off him like water off a duck's back. He was in far too jubilant a mood to be put down. 'Ah, better than that. Much better than that,' he crowed, smiling broadly.

Purdey grunted moodily. 'You must tell me about it some time. Over dinner with my mother, perhaps?'

Spelman's eyes glinted with cunning. 'Oh, I shall tell you about my plans, I promise you,' he assured her. 'I really am rather proud of them. It would be a pity to let you die without knowing why.'

His words were only confirmation of what Purdey had already feared. 'You are going to kill me then?' she intoned flatly.

'Oh yes.' Spelman nodded almost absently, as if Purdey's life meant no more to him than that of an irritant mosquito.

Purdey lapsed into sullen silence. There really wasn't much one could say to follow a line like that.

Spelman turned to the ape-like Marvin, who had been keeping a night watch over Purdey. 'Is Packer ready yet?'

The big man shrugged stupidly. A look of pained irritation crossed Spelman's face briefly. He had little time for thick, bestial types like Marvin's type. He used them only when absolutely necessary. 'Well, go and find out, will you?' he snapped, after a second.

Marvin nodded dumbly and shuffled off. Spelman crossed the room to the filing cabinet and pulled out Steed's gun, still neatly wrapped in its plastic bag. He dangled it in the air, turning back to Purdey. 'You know about this, I suppose?' he teased.

'No,' Purdey lied, sensing that Spelman might just be

carried away by his own enthusiasm to be a trifle sloppy. It was a wild long-shot, but worth playing for what it was worth. Under direct threat of death, any shot was worth trying.

'Steed's own gun,' Spelman said proudly. 'I switched it on him when he was at the retraining centre.'

'Very clever,' Purdey murmured, adjusting herself in her chair and crossing her knees decoratively. The move served to cover up the slight backward movement of the actual chair towards the wall behind. Purdey needed all the room for manoeuvre she could get, for she was almost at the end of her chain. 'And what do you propose to do with it?' she went on, still inching her chair backwards with the heel of her shoe.

Spelman dangled the plastic bag in the air again, his eyes glinting. 'With the aid of this, John Steed is going to be branded not only as a traitor, but as a murderer,' he muttered.

Purdey judged her moment as he took a couple of steps towards her. Without looking round, she had no way of knowing how much chain she had to run on, but the seconds were ticking away fast, and it might be her last chance. Packer, Marvin or Vernon could well return at any moment. While it was just her and Spelman . . . and there was a gun in the offing . . . the odds seemed about the best she was going to be offered.

Leaping from her chair like an uncoiling spring, Purdey delivered a vicious kick to the muscle just above the back of Spelman's knee-cap. Caught off-guard, the blow had its desired effect. Spelman's leg buckled under him. Off balance, he lurched several paces nearer to Purdey, gasping with pain and surprise.

Purdey took full advantage of her temporary gain. Her right fist stabbed out at Spelman's face as her left reached for the wrapped gun.

With any other man, the double move might well have succeeded, but Spelman was also a highly trained field agent. He weaved aside, avoiding the blow. Purdey's fist shot harmlessly past the side of his head into thin air. At the same time, he pulled back his hand which held the gun, so that Purdey's grasping fingers closed over the same nebulous substance. Limping back out of range, Spelman rubbed his leg muscle painfully and regarded Purdey with a rueful stare. 'That was almost very neat,' he murmured, with more than a trace of professional respect. 'Yes indeed, you are going to be a very great loss to the Department, my dear Purdey.'

Purdey sank back into her chair, her shoulders slumping with resignation. It had been her one slim chance. Now it was gone. It seemed highly unlikely that a man as sharp as Paul Spelman would give her another.

Marvin re-entered the room, closely followed by Packer. Packer was neatly dressed in his grey suit, bowler and broolly. Purdey realised at once that he was going to impersonate Steed once again.

Spelman looked him over with satisfaction. 'Yes, I think you'll do very well,' he murmured. 'I should think you ought to be able to get fairly close to almost anyone in the Department without them catching on.'

'Clothes do not maketh the man,' Purdey said cuttingly. 'He doesn't look anything like Steed.'

Spelman just grinned. 'Then we shall have to choose our spot rather carefully, shan't we? Somewhere dark, somewhere with plenty of large objects around to mask clear view. Somewhere like the underground car park beneath the Department building. That should do nicely.'

Purdey lapsed into depression again. Spelman certainly seemed to have left nothing to chance. So far, his plans appeared to be going as smoothly as a well-oiled machine.

Spelman held out the wrapped gun towards Packer. 'You know what to do?' he queried.

The imitation Steed nodded thoughtfully. Spelman smiled. 'Good. Go to it, then.'

As Packer stuffed the gun into his jacket pocket and started to make his exit, Spelman turned back to Purdey. 'Well, I must be going too,' he announced. 'I can't stand here all morning chatting to the likes of you. I must get in to work at the Department on time . . . keep up my image.'

Purdey managed a sarcastic snort. 'Still dedicated to the job?'

Spelman laughed. 'Oh yes,' he answered. 'National security absorbs my every waking minute.'

He did not get an opportunity to expand upon that highly ambiguous statement, even had Purdey wished to pursue it any further. At that moment, Vernon strolled into the room.

Spelman whirled on him. 'Is everything set?'

Vernon nodded. 'Perfectly,' he muttered.

'Good.' Spelman glanced at his wristwatch. 'It's now seven-fifteen. The early-morning post should arrive at Steed's place about eight. You will call him at exactly eight-fifteen . . . is that clear?'

The man nodded again. 'I'll do everything exactly as we agreed,' he confirmed, checking his own watch as he spoke.

Spelman smiled. 'And when Packer does his bit, we'll have John Steed nicely sewn up.' He slammed one clenched fist into his open palm. 'And that'll be it. We'll have him. Steed will be finished, for good.' He looked, briefly, back at Purdey. 'And you too, I'm afraid, my dear Purdey.'

Returning to Vernon, Spelman nodded. 'You'd better get going.' As the man headed for the door, Spelman

nursed his bruised leg ruefully and gave a last order to Marvin. 'Keep a sharp eye on her. She can be tricky,' he muttered, jabbing a thumb in Purdey's direction. Then, on an afterthought, he looked into the big man's ape-like face again and smiled. 'Well, keep an eye on her, anyway.'

With a last, almost cheery wave, Spelman left in the wake of his despatched minions.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Clive Walters eased out of his hiding place behind the hedge as the postman stopped his motor-bike, dismounted, and began to stroll towards the end of Steed's drive. Security card held out in front of him like a magic talisman, Walters confronted the man, reaching out with his free hand for the thin sheaf of letters he had been about to deliver. 'I'll take those if you don't mind,' he murmured quietly.

The postman looked at him, at first in alarm and then in puzzlement. He squinted closely at the security card, shaking his head a little. Finally, with a slight shrug, he handed the three letters over and returned to his bike. As he roared off into the distance, Walters turned towards his parked car, tapping the letters against his palm thoughtfully.

Settling into the front seat of his car, Walters scrutinised the three letters more closely. Reaching into the dashboard pocket, he extracted a long, thin-bladed knife and set to work, slitting the first letter open along the flap so that it could be re-sealed if necessary.

The first letter revealed nothing except that Steed's reputation as a ladies man was totally deserved. Walters did not read the intimate missive in detail, merely glancing

through the general gist of the message, his trained eyes looking for any suggestion of a coded message or cryptic clue.

There was nothing. Putting it down on to the passenger seat beside him, Walters lifted the second, lavender-coloured envelope to his nose and sniffed at it gently. A delicate, but obviously expensive perfume greeted him. His face creasing into a doubtful, slightly guilty look, Walters placed that one, unopened, on top of the first. He turned his full attention to the third letter, a bulky, plain manilla envelope with Steed's name and address printed in large, bland capitals.

Slitting it open, Walters upended the envelope, tipping its contents into his lap. He stared at the five thousand pounds with a perplexed frown, gradually hardening into a sad, disappointed look. Nelson's Column might not yet have gone, but it was certainly rocking on its foundations.

Slipping the notes back into the envelope, Walters reached for the car radio-phone and tapped out McKay's private number.

'Hello sir? I think I've got something. I've just intercepted Steed's morning mail . . .'

He did not get a chance to finish. McKay's voice rose in an indignant scream. 'You did what? I told you to be discreet . . . maintain a routine surveillance.'

Walters coughed nervously before answering. 'Yes, I know sir . . . I took it upon myself . . . a hunch. But it may have paid off, sir.'

McKay sighed wearily. 'All right, Walters, it's done now. What is it?'

'Five thousand pounds in used notes, sir. In a plain envelope, no message of any kind. A pay-off, perhaps?'

'Perhaps.' McKay still sounded a trifle sceptical. He did not really want to be convinced, for accepting Steed's guilt was a difficult step to take, after so many years of

knowing and trusting the man. Still, there was more than enough doubt now to preclude his taking chances. 'All right Walters, maintain surveillance and keep in touch,' he ordered.

'Will do, sir.' Walters snapped off the radio link and climbed out of his car. He walked briskly across to his hiding place behind the hedge and took up his position once again, his keen eyes trained upon the entrance to Steed's private drive. It might be a long wait.

Inside the house, Steed jumped nervously as the telephone shrilled unexpectedly. His normally cool nerves were stretched taut. It was as much as he could do to remain completely rational and alert. Being calm as well was asking too much. Striding across the room, he snatched up the receiver. Vernon's soft, high-pitched voice greeted him.

'It's time to make the delivery, Steed. You must follow my instructions exactly . . . to the letter. Be at the public telephone box on the North side of Pembury Park in precisely twenty minutes. You will wear your grey suit, and take the Rover from the garage. Twenty minutes, Mr. Steed.'

The line went dead before Steed could get in a single word. With a heavy sigh, Steed replaced the receiver and checked his watch. It was exactly eight-fifteen. Crossing the study, he headed towards his dressing room to change his suit, wondering why that particular apparel had been designated. He concluded that it must be for purposes of easy recognition. It seemed, on the surface, to be a reasonable enough request. Even had it not been, Steed realised that he would have complied with virtually any demand, anyway. He was in too deep to back out now. He was committed; there could be no argument about that.

He was changed in three minutes flat. Pausing only to pick up the envelope containing the vital papers, Steed ran from the house to the garage, climbing into the Rover. With a brief glance at his watch, he started the car, slipped it into gear and screamed out of the garage down the drive.

Walters heard the car coming and threw himself back into the hedge as it neared the end of the drive. Pre-occupied, Steed failed to notice him as he turned right out of the drive and pointed the nose of the Rover down the road. Walters regarded the rapidly-disappearing rear of the Rover thoughtfully for a few seconds before running to his own vehicle and snapping it into life. Driving one-handed, he set off in pursuit, manipulating the radio-telephone link to base.

'Come in, Walters,' McKay's voice said. 'Where are you now?'

'Steed has taken off in something of a hurry,' Walters informed him. 'I'm in pursuit, keeping a safe distance. The general direction seems to be towards Pembury Park.'

'All right. Keep in touch. Let me know if Steed does anything suspicious.'

'Wilco.' Walters replaced the radio mike and concentrated upon his driving. It would not be an easy job to tail an experienced man like Steed. Too close, and Walters would give himself away. On the other hand, at the speed Steed was driving, it would be all too easy to lose him altogether.

The telephone in the public box was already ringing as Steed brought the Rover to a skidding stop by the roadside and ran across the grass towards it. Throwing open the door, he jumped inside and snatched up the receiver. 'Yes?'

Vernon's voice was curt. 'The deal's off, Steed. You were followed.'

'What?' Steed jerked his head around in surprise, staring through the glass of the telephone box back down the road. In the distance, he could just see Walters' car pulling to a halt in a small lay-by.

'We'll give you one last chance, Steed,' Vernon muttered down the telephone. 'You have exactly one hour to lose him. Leave your car in the underground car park at the Department buildings. Take a taxi to Mount Street, then catch a number 29 bus as far as Pennock's Corner. Go into the Corner House restaurant and wait. In exactly one hour from now there will be a telephone call for a Mr. Fredericks.'

Steed checked his watch as the line went dead. It was just coming up to eight-forty. Keeping a careful eye on the parked car which had been tailing him, Steed crossed to the Rover, left ticking over, and slammed it into gear. Wheels spinning wildly, the car took off, leaving black tyre marks against the road surface.

In the lay-by, Walters snatched up the radio-phone again. 'He's either spotted me or he's in a terrible hurry to keep an appointment,' he yelled into it. 'He's just taken off like a bat out of Hell. I'm going after him.' Hanging up the mike, he stamped down upon the throttle, skidding briefly on the loose gravel of the lay-by before hitting the tarmac surface of the road and roaring in pursuit of Steed's racing vehicle.

Steed pressed his foot almost down to the floorboards as the road ahead opened up into a wide, straight stretch of clearway. He glanced briefly down at the speedometer as it quivered around the hundred mark, slowly creeping over it. A quick glance in the rear-view mirror confirmed that the pursuit vehicle was having trouble keeping up with him, for Walters' car was only a vague dot in the

distance, becoming fainter by the moment. With a faint grin of satisfaction, Steed kept up his reckless speed, even though the road was beginning to wind again. Tyres screaming, the Rover bit into the bends, rocking wildly on suspension never designed for quite such harsh treatment. Steed's hands were clamped like vices on the steering wheel, fighting the pull of the wheels until the muscles of his wrists began to ache with strain.

Behind him, Walters had thrown all caution to the winds and was desperately attempting to keep up. The gap between the two vehicles remained constant, even closing slightly at one stage as Steed slowed, fractionally, to pass a couple of road junctions with his country horns blaring.

Steed glanced into the rear-view mirror again, cursing softly under his breath. Speed alone was not going to do the job, he decided. In mounting desperation, his eyes flashed to the dashboard clock. He would have to do something else . . . and do it fast, for there was not much leeway left to him. He would have to lose the pursuing car in the next minute or so if he was to have adequate time to comply with his instructions. It would take at least twenty minutes to drive to the car park, and the best part of half an hour to make the taxi and bus trip with any safety margin at all. And Steed firmly believed in safety margins. They invariably meant the difference between life and death.

Steed slowed down considerably, no longer concerned as the pursuing vehicle closed up the gap behind him. There were other ways of shaking off a tail than by trying to outrun it. He concentrated upon the road ahead, his sharp eyes seeking out a suitable place to pull a new trick out of the bag.

The most likely spot was about a quarter of a mile up the road. Steed knew it well . . . a deserted gasworks, a

rusting monument to the country's conversion to natural gas. Steed could only hope that the huge and heavy steel gates of the entrance were open, as they usually were. If not, then the result could be very messy indeed.

Coming up to the concealed entrance, Steed slowed to a moderate sixty and took a deep breath. It was now or never! Swinging the wheel over hard, he sent the Rover into a controlled skid which took it off the road, straight through a flimsy barricade of wooden signs which said 'Keep Out', and up the short driveway towards the massive iron gates.

They were open, just as Steed had prayed. Hurtling through them into the open courtyard, Steed stamped on the brakes, bringing the Rover to a sliding emergency stop. Throwing himself out of the car, he dashed across to the gates and threw the whole weight of his body against the nearest one. With a shriek of rusted hinges, it began to move. With a last, final effort, Steed left the heavy gate swinging into the closed position and ran back to his car, jumping in and slamming it into gear. He skirted around the back of the nearest gasometer, sliding to a halt again.

Seconds later, he heard the screech of tyres as the pursuing car swung off the road after him, followed almost immediately by the jarring crash of metal against metal as the bonnet of the vehicle smashed into the closed gate. Satisfied that his pursuer would be in no state to continue the chase, Steed engaged gear, shot from behind the gasometer and headed across the open courtyard towards a flimsy barbed-wire fence. He ploughed straight through it, guiding the bucking car over a short stretch of wasteland before whipping round and heading for a second fence, and a rough access lane which led back to the main road.

Regaining the road, Steed stamped down on the

accelerator once again, quickly putting as much distance between himself and the gasworks as possible. A quick glance in the rear-view mirror confirmed that the ruse had worked perfectly. He was clear and away, with no further possibility of pursuit. Slowing to a more conventional pace, Steed headed for the Department car park, to carry out his instructions.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The loudspeaker on McKay's desk crackled into life. Walters spoke hesitantly, evidently embarrassed. 'Sorry, I've lost him. He threw me off rather cleverly, I'm afraid. More tricks than a barrel-full of monkeys, has Steed.'

His face grim and taut, McKay glanced briefly up at Mike Gambit, who stood over his desk. He gave a slight shrug, as though acceding to the inevitable. Gambit only grinned, faintly, his admiration for Steed getting the better of him.

McKay flipped the intercom switch. 'All right, Walters. Return to base immediately,' he snapped, breaking off contact. He returned his gaze to Gambit. 'Now, do you see what I mean? Even you can't argue that Steed is acting irrationally. There's a rotten smell somewhere, Gambit . . . and Steed is right smack in the middle of it.'

Gambit nodded, somewhat reluctantly. 'I concede that he is acting oddly, yes,' he agreed. 'But that's not unusual for Steed, is it? He's not exactly known for doing things by the book, is he?'

McKay stared at the man sadly for some moments. He had an unpleasant duty to perform, and he did not relish it the least little bit. He chose his words carefully. 'You're

a loyal friend for John Steed to have, Gambit,' he muttered. 'But I also know you as a shrewd and fair-minded man. If I were to show you visual evidence against Steed . . . would you have a purely objective viewpoint?'

For a second, some alarm registered on Gambit's features. 'Evidence? What sort of evidence?'

Wordlessly, McKay stood up and crossed the room to where he had already set up the projector and screen. Switching it on, he returned to his desk. 'See what you make of this piece of film,' he murmured quietly.

Gambit watched the small screen set up against the far wall of the office. He stared at the figure of Steed proceeding down Edge Street, taking in every detail. He was silent as Steed stopped by the two dustbins, extracting a wrapped bundle from his jacket and dropping it carefully into one of them. When the short piece of film had finished, McKay spoke again, in a calm, low voice.

'That house is a known drop-off point for a cell of hostile agents,' he said. 'Steed did not know of its existence, and could not have been working on the case. Therefore . . . what's his connection?'

Gambit shrugged. 'Perhaps no connection at all,' he argued. 'That film proves absolutely nothing . . . it could be a coincidence. Steed could have been throwing away anything, even an old cigar wrapper. He's a very tidy person.'

McKay shook his head sadly. 'That doesn't wash, Gambit . . . and you know it. Anyway, there's more . . . even above Steed's odd behaviour this morning.'

'More?' Doubt was beginning to show in Gambit's voice.

In answer, McKay stood up, crossing to his safe. He pointed to a small digital register by the side of the lock. 'This safe holds the most important and secret files which

come through this department,' he murmured. 'Most of them are so important that we can take no chances whatsoever with their security. This little register here is an electronic calculator. It registers every time this safe is opened. I have opened it exactly ten times. As you can see, it registers eleven. Now there are very few people who could gain access to this office and open that safe. Steed is one of them.'

Gambit hedged, awkwardly. 'That still doesn't prove anything.'

'Only Steed knew about the papers which were in here,' McKay pointed out. 'I told nobody else . . . absolutely nobody.'

Gambit looked absolutely shattered. 'But it's unthinkable . . . to think of Steed becoming a traitor,' he whispered in an awed voice.

McKay regarded him piercingly, sensing something beath the man's shocked, hurt expression. 'What is it, Gambit? Have you got other information I don't even know about?'

Gambit chewed his lip nervously for some seconds. Finally, he spoke, grudgingly. 'All right . . . I found Steed in here last night. But he was nowhere near the safe . . . and he did have an explanation. He said he was checking your diary for a V.I.P. visit.'

'The Minister is due here next week,' McKay mumbled rather absently.

Gambit seized upon it gratefully. 'There, you see? He was telling the truth.'

McKay shook his head slowly. 'There's too much circumstantial evidence, Gambit . . . and you know it. There's no other course of action open to me but to pull Steed in for questioning.'

'God, man . . . if he's innocent, it would absolutely finish him,' Gambit blurted out. 'Think of Steed's pride,

McKay. If he felt that his most close and trusted colleagues had doubted him for one second, you'd lose the best man you've ever had on the spot.'

'If he's innocent,' McKay repeated, underscoring the first word with heavy irony. 'Don't you think I've gone through all of this in my mind a dozen times over? I just wish there was another way.'

'Maybe there is,' Gambit murmured quietly.

'What?' McKay was willing to listen to virtually anything. The prospect of confronting John Steed with direct accusations was not one he relished at all.

'Let me tag him,' Gambit suggested. 'If anyone can find out what is going on, it's me. I can be totally discreet . . . Steed trusts me. A routine surveillance, coupled with what I know about Steed, should give me a bit of an edge over any other agent. You just heard how easily he shook Walters off the trail.'

McKay nodded thoughtfully. 'It won't be a pleasant task,' he pointed out. 'As you just pointed out, Steed trusts you. Using that trust leaves you wide open for some pretty nasty moral dilemmas.'

Gambit shook his head. 'No . . . because I'll be looking out to prove Steed innocent,' he said. 'I'll make no bones about that, right from the start. However, if he *is* guilty . . .'

Gambit broke off. McKay finished the sentence for him. 'You are about the only man with a fair chance of bringing him in.'

Gambit nodded. 'Exactly.'

McKay was silent for a while, drumming his fingers on the desk-top thoughtfully. 'You want to volunteer for this mission? It's not one I would even consider ordering you on.'

'Yes.' Gambit was adamant. 'I'm volunteering . . . and I think you'll accept, because you don't want to see Steed found guilty any more than I do. Right?'

McKay nodded in agreement. 'Yes, of course. A sympathetic eye . . . yet objective at the same time. It might work.'

'It has to work,' Gambit said firmly. 'It's perhaps the only thing which could possibly work. You'll call Walters off as soon as he checks in?'

'Yes. Consider yourself on the job from now,' McKay confirmed. 'I'll give you the go-ahead as soon as Walters arrives.'

Gambit moved towards the door. McKay called after him. 'Gambit?'

'Yes?' Gambit turned, eyeing his superior calmly.

'At present, there's nothing confirmed against Steed . . . but if there is . . .' He left the sentence unfinished.

Gambit nodded gravely, understanding. 'It'll be my job to bring him in.'

'Dead or alive, Gambit,' McKay muttered heavily. 'You might not get a choice.'

Gambit was silent for a few seconds. 'Yes, I know,' he said finally, in a strangely subdued voice. He closed the office door quietly behind him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Walters limped his damaged car into the underground car park and manoeuvred it into position at the end of the line. He switched off the ignition and climbed out, starting to cross the dimly-lit area towards the elevator.

Suddenly, he froze in his tracks as his eyes fell upon Steed's Rover, parked neatly in its usual reserved space. Turning, Walters sprinted back to his own car and activated the telephone link.

McKay answered immediately. 'Yes?'

Walters spoke guardedly. 'Is there anyone with you, sir?'

'No . . . why?' McKay asked, a little puzzled.

'Is Steed in the building?' came Walter's second question.

'Of course not,' McKay snapped, a little peevishly. 'Why do you ask?'

'He's here. At least, his car is,' Walters answered. 'I'm downstairs, in the underground car park. Steed's car is here.'

'What? Are you sure?' Despite his knowledge of Steed's unconventional behaviour, McKay was a little thrown by the totally unexpected appearance of the man.

'Yes, sir. Absolutely. I'd recognise Steed's car anywhere,' Walters murmured. He fell silent, awaiting orders. A sudden movement across the other side of the car park caught his eye. 'Hold it, just a moment . . . I thought I saw somebody,' he whispered into the radio microphone. Dropping it on to the passenger seat, he opened the driver's door quietly and edged out of the car. Crouching, Walters crept along the side of the bonnet and peered over to where he had seen a shadowy figure show, briefly, from behind one of the concrete roof supports. The figure appeared again, ducking out from the cover of the concrete post and scuttling furtively across the car park, making the most of the shelter provided by the stationary vehicles.

It was only a brief glimpse, but there was no mistaking the burly figure, the broad shoulders, the well-cut suit and the perky bowler. Walters crept back along the side of his car, eased open the door and reached inside for the microphone. 'He's down here,' he whispered quietly. 'Steed is here. I just caught a glimpse of him.'

There was a short silence.

Walters broke it. 'What shall I do?' he wanted to know.

McKay forced himself to remain calm. He considered every possibility quickly. 'Tell him I want to speak to him,' he murmured, after a while.

Walters looked dubiously across to where he had last spotted Steed. In the dim light, he saw a flash of grey and a dark shadow flit between two parked cars. 'The way he's acting, I don't think he wants to be very conversational right now,' he hissed into the radio-phone. 'Shall I challenge him?'

'No!' McKay was adamant. The last thing he wanted was a direct confrontation. Walters was not very experienced in the field. 'Try to persuade him to talk to me,' McKay finished, weakly.

'I'll try sir.' Walters dropped the mike again and stood up, exposing himself above the top of his car. He called softly across the underground car park. 'Steed?'

There was no immediate answer. Walters raised his voice and tried again. 'John? It's me . . . Clive Walters. Listen, Steed, Tom McKay would like to have a word with you. I have him on the radio-phone right now.'

From the shadows, a muffled voice answered uncertainly. 'Walters?'

The guarded, querulous tone seemed to explain a few things. Steed had failed to recognise him in the bad light, Walters decided. 'Yes, it's me,' he confirmed. 'Are you coming over?'

'Yes.' The shadowy figure stepped out from behind a delivery van and began to stroll jauntily across the intervening space. Walters dropped down and snatched up the mike. 'It's all right,' he said, his voice showing his relief. 'He's coming over now. I don't think he recognised me.'

Walters stood up, skirting around the front of his car to greet the approaching figure. He smiled broadly. 'Looks like we've both been stalking each other,' he said, conversationally. 'Who did you think I was?'

The gap between the two men had narrowed to a few yards. Walters squinted into the gloom as they came together. Too late, he realised the deception. Packer brought up the gun, still wrapped in the cellophane bag, and squeezed off a shot at almost point-blank range. The impact of the slug picked Walters up off his feet and threw him backwards over the bonnet of his car. He slid down the other side to crumple into a heap on the concrete floor of the car park.

Packer ran around the front of the car, standing over his victim. With his foot, he roughly turned Walters over on to his back and taking careful aim, shot him once more through the heart. Satisfied with a thorough job, he backed away quickly, pausing only to shake Steed's gun out of its wrapper into a nearby trash bin before running for his Vanden Plas and screaming out of the underground car park towards the road outside.

'Come in,' McKay barked, brusquely, in response to the gentle tap upon his office door.

The door opened. Gambit strolled in, wondering vaguely why he had been summoned a second time that morning. He cast a glance at McKay's face, grim and uncompromising. It was enough to tell him that his superior had not called him back for a friendly chat. 'You wanted to see me, sir?'

McKay gestured to the chair. 'Sit down, Gambit.' He waited until the man was seated comfortably before carrying on, in a low, controlled voice. 'What we were talking about earlier . . . that confirmation against Steed.'

'What about it?'

'We have it,' McKay said bluntly. He reached across his desk, pulling a small tape recorder to the side. 'Listen

to this.' He stabbed the replay button. Gambit listened in silence to Walters' last message.

'It's all right . . . He's coming over now. I don't think he recognised me . . .'

There was a short silence, rudely shattered by the echoing crash of two gunshots. McKay switched the recorder off, gazing up at Gambit miserably. 'He positively identified Steed. Those were his last words.'

'Dead?' Gambit asked quietly, his throat suddenly dry.

McKay nodded grimly. 'A professional job. Clean, neat, quick. That's two top agents, Gambit. Both dead . . . and Steed positively identified as being there only seconds beforehand. There can't be any doubt any more.'

There was a light tap on the door.

'Come,' McKay called softly.

Spelman walked in, a sheet of paper in his hand. 'Report from central licensing, sir. That was Steed's personal gun all right. The serial number checks. We'll have to wait for ballistics, of course . . . but there's not much doubt.'

'Thank you, Spelman.' McKay accepted the paper, barely giving it a glance before dropping it on to his desk. He returned his attention to Gambit. 'As I said, Gambit . . . there's no room for doubt any more. Steed shot Clive Walters down in cold blood . . . right below us in the car park. He's gone rogue, Gambit. We have a mad dog on our hands.'

Gambit sat rigid, absolutely stunned. 'I can't believe it,' he said, in hushed tones.

McKay shrugged helplessly. 'It's not easy for me, either,' he pointed out. 'But I have no choice any more.' He paused momentarily, chewing his bottom lip and regarding Gambit miserably. 'You're going to have to bring him in . . . any way you can.'

'Any way?' Gambit queried the implication buried beneath the words.

McKay's face was devoid of emotion. 'I doubt if you can take him alive,' he muttered, in a matter-of-fact voice.

'I can try,' Gambit said, stubbornly.

McKay nodded. 'Yes, you can try,' he agreed. 'Just as Clive Walters tried.' He fell silent again for a long time, flexing his fingers until the joints cracked. Finally, he spoke again, in a gentle, almost paternal voice. 'Look, Gambit . . . I don't feel right actually *ordering* you to go after Steed. I can detail Spelman, if you'd rather.'

Gambit shook his head firmly. 'No, I have to do it,' he said quietly. 'I think Steed himself would know that.'

McKay nodded understandingly. 'I'm sorry it has to be this way, Gambit. I know how you felt about John Steed.'

Gambit shrugged, letting out a slightly bitter laugh. 'Should have remembered a thing my old dad tried to teach me. Never put anybody on a pedestal . . . the greatest idol can turn out to have feet of clay.' He slammed a bunched fist down on to the top of McKay's desk. 'Damn you, Steed,' he hissed out from between clenched teeth, suddenly overcome with a strange mixture of emotions.

He pulled himself together, sitting upright in the high-backed chair. 'Is it going to be just me, or are you putting out a general directive to all agents?'

McKay regarded him doubtfully. 'You still think you can bring him in alive, don't you?'

Gambit shook his head uncertainly. 'Right now, I don't quite know what I think,' he admitted.

McKay nodded understandingly. 'Believe me, I appreciate how you feel,' he murmured quietly. 'John Steed has been a good friend to me, too.' He paused, his face creasing into a thoughtful frown. Finally, he came to a decision. 'All right, Gambit . . . I'll give you until this

evening. The rest of the day, on your own. After that, I'll have no choice but to put out a general alert to all agents . . . kill Steed on sight!

Gambit looked his superior in the eye, a wistful smile playing about his lips. 'A few hours? Is that all he gets, in return for a lifetime of service?'

McKay averted Gambit's steady gaze. He stared, morosely, down at his desk-top. 'I'm sorry, Gambit. That's the best I can do.'

'Yeah,' Gambit breathed. 'I know. I suppose I'd better make the most of it.' He slid his automatic out of his shoulder holster, rammed in a fresh clip and checked the mechanism.

'A drink?' McKay asked. He produced a bottle of whisky from his desk drawer and uncorked it.

Gambit shook his head. 'This isn't the occasion,' he said quietly.

'No, perhaps you're right.' McKay popped the cork back into the bottle and returned it to the drawer. 'Perhaps when we have something to celebrate?'

'Sure.' Gambit stood up, pushing his chair back. 'If there's nothing else . . . ?'

'No, carry on,' McKay murmured.

Gambit left the room, closing the door quietly behind him. Outside, in the corridor, two men were wheeling a trolley bearing Walters' body. Gambit stopped them, briefly lifting the sheet which covered the dead agent's face, then dropping it back into place. With a heavy heart, he continued walking down the corridor.

Paul Spelman emerged from his office just as Gambit was passing. He called out. 'Gambit? Are you going after Steed?'

Gambit made no reply. His face said all there was to say.

'Shoot first and ask questions afterwards,' Spelman said. 'You'll only get one chance with John Steed.' With

this advice, he turned away and headed up the corridor towards McKay's office.

Gambit continued towards the elevator, his tread heavy and his broad shoulders slumped.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Steed sipped nervously at his third cup of coffee, consulting his watch frequently. It was already ten minutes past the promised deadline, and the telephone call had still not come through.

Steed's mind raced, pondering on the dozen or so things which could have gone wrong. Miserably, he reflected that if the trail went cold now, he knew no more than he had at the very beginning. Purdey was still in the hands of her abductors, with no clue whatsoever as to their identity or location. Everything hinged upon the kidnappers remaining in touch. The ball was firmly in their court.

Over by the cash desk, a trimphone purred softly. The cashier lifted it, listened, then peered out around the interior of the restaurant. It seemed a rather pointless exercise. Steed was the only customer.

'Mister Fredericks?' she called, uncertainly.

Steed pushed his chair away hastily, leaping to his feet and almost knocking over his coffee. He hurried across to the desk.

The girl held the receiver out towards him a haughty look on her face. 'We don't usually expect customers to use this place as a private office,' she said snootily.

'It's very important. A matter of life or death, I assure you,' Steed countered, flashing the girl one of his most disarming smiles. 'Have you a private extension?'

'Certainly not.' The girl's eyes flashed with indignation. Steed's powers of charm were most definitely off form. She practically threw the telephone into his outstretched hand.

Steed lifted the receiver to his ear. 'Yes?'

'We're not sure of you any more, Steed,' said Packer's voice. 'Perhaps we were wrong to trust you. You were specifically instructed to tell absolutely nobody . . . yet you arranged to have yourself tailed this morning.'

'I knew nothing about it, I swear,' Steed pleaded desperately. 'I said nothing. This is still between us . . . a strict agreement.'

'Between gentlemen?' Packer chuckled at his own sarcasm. He indulged himself for a few seconds, then became serious again. 'We shall have to think things over for a while. Decide what to do. Perhaps we shall give you another chance . . . perhaps not. Go home and wait, Steed. If we decide to give you the benefit of the doubt, we will contact you later with new instructions.'

Packer hung up abruptly, before Steed could put in a single word of argument.

Steed replaced the telephone. The cashier looked at him strangely. 'Will that be all . . . or would you like to dictate a few letters to me?' she enquired sarcastically.

Steed ignored her. He fished in his pocket and dropped a handful of coins on to the counter, then walked out. He stood in the doorway for some time, immersed in thought. Finally, he stepped out on to the pavement and began to walk towards the corner to hail a taxi.

Steed paused on the street corner, his eyes searching the busy road for the tell-tale light of a vacant taxi. It was not the best time of day to be looking for one. Steed resigned himself to a long wait.

This simple irritation served to crystallise all the frustrations which had been building up over the past

few days. Packer's words rang in Steed's mind; 'Go home and wait . . . If we decide to give you the benefit of the doubt . . .'

With a mounting sense of impotent fury, Steed realised that he was utterly sick to the teeth of playing a purely passive role. The kidnappers were treating him like a naughty child, taunting him, scolding him, threatening dire punishments should he dare to disobey. Such treatment sapped a man's ego, emasculated him. It was time that Steed adopted a more aggressive role, took some positive action. The urge to fight back crowded out all other thoughts in Steed's mind. If only there was a way . . . something he could do.

A grubby child of about nine stepped around the corner to accost him, rattling a small cardboard box containing a handful of coins. 'Penny for the guy, mister?'

Steed stared at the small boy blankly, unable to quite re-establish contact with the real world. His gaze fell down to the pavement, where a ragged pile of old clothing, loosely stuffed with newspapers, passed for a Guy Fawkes dummy. On the guy's head, the boy had placed an old top-hat, decorated with a couple of squibs and catherine wheels.

'Penny for the guy, mister,' the boy repeated, hopefully.

Despite his worries, Steed smiled. 'Bit early, aren't you?' It was still only early October.

The boy shrugged carelessly. 'Are you gonna give me any money or not,' he demanded, with pure, childish logic.

Steed stared at the guy once more, as a flash of a wild idea came to him. Suddenly, with a touch of his usual jauntiness, Steed grinned broadly. He delved into his jacket pocket, bringing out a handful of silver coins and displaying them under the boy's nose.

The child's eyes twinkled. 'Cor, thanks, mister.'

Steed rattled the money in his palm. 'But not for the

guy,' he murmured. 'In exchange for some information.'

The boy eyed him suspiciously. 'What's that, then?'

'Where can I buy some fireworks?' Steed wanted to know. 'A bright young lad like you ought to know that.'

The boy rattled the cardboard box suggestively. It was to be a strictly cash-in-advance transaction. Smiling, Steed dropped the coins into it.

'Over the road, in the sweet shop. They got some fireworks in,' the boy volunteered, pointing across the street with a grimy finger.

'Thanks.' Steed touched the rim of his bowler, turning to face across the street. He stepped into the road, dodging between the traffic. There was a new spring in his step as he headed towards the indicated shop and walked in. Flimsy as his hastily-conceived plan was, it was at least something positive. It made all the difference in the world, giving Steed a renewed sense of optimism.

He strolled into the shop to make the necessary purchases. A few moments later he emerged with a large box of fireworks, several boxes of red matches and a roll of sticky tape. Tucking the fireworks under his arm, he stepped to the edge of the pavement again and looked out for a taxi.

As if offering some kind of omen, one appeared almost immediately. Steed flagged it down and climbed in, settling back in the seat.

'Where to, Guv?' the driver asked.

Steed started to give his home address, then checked himself. He was through with blindly taking orders from the kidnappers. He would not go home meekly and await their further orders. Over the past few days, Steed had been subjected to a systematic war of nerves, a process of disorientation. Now it was time to give the kidnappers a taste of their own medicine.

Relishing the thought, Steed directed the driver to his

favourite club. He would spend the afternoon there, while the kidnappers worried about him failing to answer his telephone.

Just for once, Steed would not be exactly where they expected him to be. He would not be ready to jump when the whip was cracked, like some trained circus animal.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It was early evening. Steed sat, hunched over his desk engrossed in pyrotechnic experiments. On the top of the desk lay the debris of his earlier efforts . . . a pile of spent matches, a fine dust-layer of gunpowder and the tattered remnants of dismembered firework cases. By a slow process of trial and error, he had finally constructed the simple but almost foolproof device which he needed.

Perfectionist that he was, Steed still wanted to conduct a last series of tests. Tearing a small strip from a sheet of sandpaper, he carefully sandwiched a red match-head into it, loosely securing the fold with a paper-clip and a piece of sticky tape. Holding the folded sandpaper gingerly between the finger and thumb of his left hand, Steed flicked the matchstick lightly with the fingers of his right. The match snapped out of its sandpaper confines with a faint scratching sound, spluttering into life. Steed watched it flare for a second, then snatched it up and blew it out before it could damage the desk top. He repeated the experiment five more times, experiencing only one failure.

Five out of six was far from perfect, and not exactly foolproof, but it was probably the best odds he could expect from such a crudely-made device. Resigning himself to the possibility of around a twenty per cent

failure rate, Steed chose two jumping jack fireworks from the box and began to tape them together very carefully. When that task was completed, he chose a fresh match, a new piece of sandpaper and another length of sticky tape. When the completed device was ready, Steed placed it gently on top of his correspondence tray and began to clear the rest of the rubbish off his desk top, leaving only his bowler, and the open envelope which contained the Allied Attack plans.

Steed stood up, stretching himself. He began to turn away from the desk. A terse command froze him in his tracks.

'Don't move, Steed.'

'Gambit?' Steed murmured, recognising his colleague's voice. He began to turn, very slowly, to face the french windows.

Gambit's bulky figure was framed by the curtains. He stood, legs slightly apart and perfectly braced. In his outstretched hands, his gun was levelled, unwaveringly, at Steed's head.

'Move away from that desk, Steed . . . very, very slowly,' Gambit muttered. 'Keep your hands well out to the side.'

Steed smiled amiably. 'Well, well . . . this is a surprise, Gambit. Is it some new kind of party game?'

Gambit stepped carefully into the room, his keen eyes making a quick reconnaissance. He could not fail to notice the envelope laying on the desk, with papers spilling out of it. Even from a distance, the words 'TOP SECRET' were perfectly legible.

Gambit shook his head sadly. 'Life is full of surprises, Steed. Some good, some bad. Some very bad indeed.'

Steed feigned a puzzled look. 'What's all this about, Gambit? A new image? The new Gambit . . . cryptic, enigmatic, man of mystery.'

The banter did nothing to erase Gambit's grim ex-

pression. He moved forward, skirting around Steed's side. Transferring the gun into his right hand, he reached out to the desk top with the left and snatched up the envelope, tipping its contents out in an untidy pile. He gave the photographs only a brief, cursory glance before returning his eyes to meet Steed's. He looked thoroughly miserable.

'I didn't believe him,' Gambit murmured, distantly. 'I didn't want to believe him.'

'Believe who?' Steed asked.

'Tom McKay,' Gambit answered dully. He reached out, scooping up the photographs and waving them, vaguely, in the air. 'But there's no arguing with this, is there? I have to believe the evidence of my own eyes.'

Steed regarded him stonily. 'Things are not always what they seem, Mike. I could explain . . . but I'm far too close, and it's far too dangerous.'

Gambit shook his head. 'What is there to explain?' he asked, waving the photographs again. 'This is the evidence . . . the confirmation. No amount of talking in the world is going to explain that away.'

The telephone rang, suddenly. Steed glanced towards it, a pained expression on his face. He turned quickly back to Gambit. 'Can I answer it?'

Gambit considered for a couple of seconds, finally nodding. 'All right . . . but walk slowly, and don't try anything,' he warned.

Steed smiled his gratitude, moving carefully across the room to answer the telephone.

'Alright Steed . . . you have your second chance,' Packer's voice informed him. 'In exactly ten minutes time, take the Bentley and drive North at exactly ten miles per hour. Make sure that the passenger door is unlocked. Bring the stuff with you.'

Steed replaced the receiver, looking over at Gambit. His lips pursed grimly, he began to walk across the room,

his right hand extended. 'Give me those photographs, Mike,' he said in a firm, controlled voice.

Gambit regarded him in amazement. 'What, so that you can hand them over? Is that what the telephone call was about . . . the delivery, the final pay-off?'

Steed continued to move slowly towards him. 'Please, Gambit. I must have those photographs.'

Gambit dropped back a couple of paces before taking up a defensive stance. He jerked the gun in his hand suggestively. 'Freeze right there, Steed. I mean it.'

Steed stopped in his tracks, nodding thoughtfully. 'Yes, of course you do,' he murmured. 'You're going to have to kill me, you do realise that?' he went on, in a strangely flat and unemotional voice. 'There's no other way. Once you start, you're going to have to kill me. I mustn't be stopped now . . . there's too much at stake. You're going to have to shoot me down in cold blood.'

'No.' Gambit shook his head firmly. 'You know better than that, Steed. There are ways. Just one shot in the leg, and you won't be hurrying off anywhere.' As he spoke, Gambit lowered the gun until the muzzle was lined up on Steed's right kneecap. 'Please don't make me do it, Steed,' Gambit pleaded. 'I'd like to remember you as a gentleman, if not as a man of honour. Let me take you in alive and uninjured . . . with dignity. You owe that to yourself . . . and me, for that matter.'

Steed regarded him stonily. 'You know me far too well to believe I could be a traitor, Gambit.'

Gambit shook his head. 'I *thought* I knew you,' he muttered. 'Now it's not up to me any more. Someone in a much higher authority has got to make the final decision. I'm just doing the simple job of taking you in.'

'Give me one hour,' Steed suggested suddenly. 'One hour and that envelope. Then I'll come quietly . . . you have my absolute word upon it.'

The gun in Gambit's hand appeared to waver for just a second. Then he tightened his grip upon it, letting out a deep sigh. 'Sorry, Steed, but I've been through this all before. Last time it was just a life-sized dummy and a tape recording of your voice. Just a test . . . and one which I didn't exactly pass with flying colours. This isn't a test . . . it's the real thing. I can't muff this one up.'

Steed stared into his friend's face, noting the determination under the grim frown. He nodded thoughtfully. 'All right, Mike . . . it's got to be truth-telling time. You leave me no choice. It's Purdey, Mike. She's been kidnapped and she's in terrible danger. That envelope is the price of her life.'

Gambit's eyes flickered uncertainly.

'Believe me, Gambit,' Steed hissed insistently. 'Do you really think I'd let myself be trapped in a situation like this for anyone else? Purdey's life is at stake.'

Gambit's moment of weakness, of wanting to believe, passed away. His lips curled into a look of scorn. 'Yes, that would be your last card against me,' he muttered. 'To use Purdey as a weapon. The last, desperate act of a beaten man.' Gambit's huge frame quivered slightly with a shudder. 'You're beneath contempt, Steed. To think that I used to admire you . . . respect you. Come on, Steed . . . we're wasting time with this pointless conversation. We'll let Tom McKay decide, shall we?'

'For God's sake . . . there isn't time for that,' Steed suddenly blurted explosively. 'Look, I can give you proof . . . will that convince you?'

'Proof?' Gambit's uncertainty arose to the surface once more. 'What kind of proof?'

Steed nodded his head towards his desk. 'In my desk . . . third drawer down. You'll find a small envelope. Take it out, Gambit . . . look at its contents.'

Gambit gritted his teeth. 'This is some trick . . . you're

playing for time,' he complained. Nevertheless, he moved slowly towards the desk.

'Look in the envelope, Gambit,' Steed repeated, urgently. He waited with baited breath as Gambit's free hand moved slowly towards the handle, sliding the drawer open.

Gambit extracted the plain envelope, upending it and shaking its contents out on to the desk top. He stared down at the lock of blonde hair which tumbled out. 'This is your proof?' he queried, glancing back at Steed.

Steed nodded. 'It's Purdey's hair . . . they sent it to me. I was to tell no-one . . . especially not you. Now will you believe me . . . can you see how important it is that you let me deliver that envelope?'

Gambit was torn with indecision. 'I only see a few strands of hair,' he pointed out. 'It's hardly what you can call conclusive proof.'

'What do you need to convince you . . . Purdey's body?' Steed cried out in exasperation. 'Look at it again, Gambit. Surely you recognise Purdey's crowning glory when you see it? You've spent enough hours admiring it.'

Steed paused while Gambit glanced down again at the lock of hair, his facial muscles working nervously. 'Well?' Steed prompted, after a few moments.

Gambit shrugged hopelessly. 'You have a lot of girlfriends,' he murmured. 'Purdey isn't the only blonde in the world.'

'Maybe not . . . but right now she's the only one who matters,' Steed snapped testily. 'I'm running out of time, Gambit . . . are you going to believe me or not?'

Gambit thought for several moments, finally shaking his head sadly. 'I can't, Steed. It's a risk I haven't the authority to take. It has to be up to McKay to make a decision like that.'

As if realising, quite suddenly, that reason was not going

to work, Steed seemed to collapse into total despair. He clasped his hands together, in an attitude of supplication. His voice took on a pleading, pathetic whine. 'Please Gambit, don't take me in. Let me run . . . give me a chance.'

Gambit could only stare at him in amazement, tinged with growing disgust. The man he had admired so much was suddenly a cringing, pitiful creature. A craven coward, begging like a dog for his freedom.

Even as Gambit watched, with a horrified fascination, Steed dropped almost to his knees, his shoulders slumped. It appeared that he would fall to the carpet at any second, grovelling at Gambit's feet.

The dramatic change in Steed's attitude was so unexpected that it took Gambit off his guard. The gun in his hand drooped as Steed crouched in front of him, wringing his clenched hands together. 'Please, Mike . . . I beg of you.'

Gambit took a step forward, looking down on Steed pityingly. 'For God's sake, Steed . . . don't let it end like this. Let me have some illusions left, at least.'

'All right, Gambit,' Steed said, suddenly. As he spoke, his clenched hands moved upwards in a blur of speed, catching Gambit a heavy blow directly in the groin.

Gambit's eyes crossed, briefly, then glazed over. Oblivious to anything except the searing pain which ripped through his entire body, he buckled up, his knees turning to jelly beneath him. Springing to an upright position, Steed stood over his fallen comrade, and cracked the side of his hand expertly against the base of Gambit's skull. With a dull groan, Gambit lapsed into unconsciousness, slumping heavily to the floor.

Steed bent over to pick up the gun which had slipped from Gambit's nerveless fingers. He tossed it casually across the room into a corner, stooping over again to

retrieve the envelope containing the photographs. He crossed to his desk, slipping a small object into the envelope before sealing it carefully. Picking up his bowler, he patted it into position and looked briefly back at the unconscious Gambit, a sad look on his face.

'Sorry, Gambit,' he murmured, with genuine regret. 'There was no other way, I'm afraid. I did warn you that I never fight fair.'

He glanced down at his watch. His allotted ten minutes were nearly up. Pausing only for a few seconds to collect his thoughts and check over his plans, Steed headed for the door.

Outside the house, Steed peered cautiously out over the drive and gardens, his keen eyes probing through the gathering dusk for signs of movement. It was possible that Gambit had not come alone, possibly placing a couple of back-up men in the grounds. He could see nothing. There was only one way to find out. Running down the steps, Steed hurried across to his garage and threw the doors open. He climbed into the Bentley, unlocking the passenger door as he had been instructed. Unchallenged, Steed started the car up and eased it gently down the drive, keeping a firm eye on the speedometer, registering exactly ten miles an hour.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Steed reached down to the dashboard, flipping on the Bentley's headlights as the dusk deepened, preparing to give way to the night. The twin beams of light carved a passageway through the quiet country road ahead, illuminating both sides of the hedgerows which flanked it. In second gear, still adhering strictly to the 10 m.p.h.

limit, the car's engine made only a gentle, purring sound, which was lost in the cloistering quietness of the open countryside. Above Steed's head, a pair of bats skittered in an erratic, seemingly aimless flight pattern, squeaking out their sonic radar. In the distance, across the fields in a small copse, a solitary owl hooted, re-establishing its private hunting territory for another night.

Had he been in the mood to commune with nature, Steed might well have taken a great deal of pleasure from the gentle autumn evening. As it was, he had more important things on his mind and worries which refused to be soothed by the rural tranquility. Instead, he was tense and alert, his sharp eyes searching out the road ahead for signs of larger, and more dangerous predators.

A few hundred yards ahead, a bulky human figure detached itself from the shapeless mass of the hedge, stepping into the road and the beam of Steed's headlights. The man held up his hand, signalling Steed to slow down to a mere crawl.

Steed eased the gear stick into neutral, allowing the Bentley to roll the last few yards with the engine ticking over. As he came up alongside the waiting man, Steed's foot tapped lightly on the brake. He had been expecting to be intercepted sooner or later.

Packer stepped to the side of the car, wrenching open the door and throwing himself into the passenger seat beside Steed. He tapped the muzzle of a Luger gently on Steed's left shoulder. 'Drive on, Mister Steed . . . not too fast, if you don't mind.'

Steed slipped the car into gear again, continuing along the road without actually pulling to a complete halt. He eased into top, keeping the Bentley at its minimum speed of around thirty miles an hour.

Packer chuckled gently. 'Well, we meet at last, Steed,'

he purred. 'I trust you have followed your instructions carefully.' As he spoke, Packer reached out and expertly frisked Steel's body for a concealed gun. Satisfied that he was unarmed, Packer settled more comfortably into his seat, still pointing the gun at Steed's head. 'Just drive on, Steed . . . keep your eyes on the road,' he instructed.

'Are you taking me to Purdey?' Steed asked.

'That depends,' Packer muttered. 'Where are the Attack plans. You have brought them, I hope?'

Steed nodded to the dashboard. 'They're in the glove compartment,' he said quietly.

'Excellent.' Packer reached forward, opening the compartment and pulling out the envelope containing the photographs. With his free hand, he raised it to his teeth, preparing to tear off the top.

'I wouldn't do that if I were you,' Steed said warningly.

Packer froze, his eyes glinting. 'Some kind of trick, Steed?'

Steed grinned. 'Something like that, I'm afraid. I rigged that envelope with a small but efficient incendiary device. If you attempt to open it, the contents will be reduced to a pile of useless ashes within seconds. I can defuse it for you, of course . . . but only after you have taken me to Purdey and assured me that she is safe and unharmed. What we call a stand-off situation, in the trade.'

Packer considered for a moment. 'Very clever,' he muttered at length, 'Yes, that would be the sort of devious idea you would come up with.' He ran his finger and thumb gently over the envelope, finally encountering a small, slightly yielding object located near the top of the flap. 'Oh yes, I can feel it,' Packer murmured. 'Very ingenious of you, Steed. I compliment you.'

'Thank you,' Steed said graciously. 'Well?'

Packer returned the envelope to the glove compartment

of the car. 'You don't leave me a great deal of choice, do you?'

Steed shrugged. 'Not a lot,' he admitted.

Packer nodded thoughtfully. 'Well, we'll leave it in a safe place for the moment,' he decided. 'I'm quite sure I can trust your technical expertise. The device is unlikely to be triggered off if it is not tampered with.'

'Unlikely?' Steed queried, with mock sarcasm. 'Unthinkable! This car has the original genuine leather trim.'

Packer sucked at his teeth reflectively. His eyes narrowed as he regarded Steed. 'You do appear to be in a most unexpectedly jocular mood, under the circumstances,' he observed thoughtfully. 'Perhaps your little fire-bomb is not the only trick you have concealed up your sleeve.' He touched the muzzle of the Luger to Steed's temple. 'I think we had better take a few precautions. Turn off the road just up here on the left.'

Steed did as he was bidden, turning off the road into a narrow access lane which wound away up a fairly steep incline towards a farm gate.

'Stop here,' Packer snapped curtly as Steed cruised up towards the gate. 'Switch the engine off.'

Steed pulled the handbrake on, turned the ignition key in the lock, and sat back. 'What now?'

'Headlights too, please Steed,' Packer murmured.

Steed reached to the dashboard, flipping a switch. They were abruptly swallowed in total darkness and silence.

Packer shifted slightly in his seat, pressing the muzzle of his gun into Steed's neck. 'No tricks please,' he murmured warningly. 'I have eyes like a cat.'

'Eat a lot of carrots, do you?' Steed asked, but Packer ignored him. They sat in complete silence for some time.

'Mind me asking what we are doing?' Steed questioned, after a while.

'Waiting,' Packer replied, simply. 'It occurs to me that the little package you placed in that envelope could quite as easily be a tracking device as an incendiary. We will wait here for a few minutes . . . just in case you have someone following us.'

'Ah,' Steed smiled. 'I didn't think of that. Perhaps we're both on the wrong side.'

Steed lapsed into silence, judging the passage of time as best he could. He estimated that well over ten minutes passed before Packer spoke again. 'Well, it would appear that I overestimated you, Steed,' he said quietly. 'You appear to be completely alone after all. We shall continue, if you don't mind.'

Steed snapped on the headlights again and started the engine. 'Which way?' he asked. 'Where are we going?'

Packer chuckled. 'Sorry Steed . . . you'll get no clues from me. I'm a little too long in the tooth to be caught out that easily. You'll get all the directions you need, as and when I see fit to give them. For now, just drive back down to the road and continue in the direction we were travelling before your little diversion.'

Steed backed carefully down the lane into the road, and eased the Bentley into forward gear. He drove on in the direction indicated, making wild guesses as to their final destination.

The car had travelled at least three miles before Packer spoke again. 'About a quarter of a mile further down the road, we will come to a crossroads,' he informed Steed. 'On the far side, you will see a public telephone box. I want you to stop right outside it.'

Unquestioningly, Steed did as he was told. Packer prodded him in the neck once more with the gun. 'Out,' he snapped.

Steed climbed out of the car. 'What now?'

Packer extracted a small slip of paper from his pocket, handing it to Steed. 'Go into the telephone box and dial this number,' he commanded. 'Let the phone ring exactly five times, then hang up immediately. Is that clear?'

'As a bell,' Steed said. 'A telephone bell.' He took the slip of paper from Packer's hand, glancing down at it. With some surprise, Steed identified it as a North London number. For the past half hour, they had been heading away from London.

'Go to it,' Packer snapped. He stood back, his Luger still levelled at Steed's head as he entered the phone box and began to dial the number. It began to ring, but there was no attempt to answer it. Steed slammed the receiver back into its rest as the fifth call signal ended. He stepped out of the telephone box to confront Packer again.

The man seemed to relax suddenly. The gun in his hand drooped a little, as though it were no longer really necessary. 'Just one final precaution,' he murmured conversationally. 'As you see, we are taking no chances with you, Steed.'

Steed didn't quite understand. 'What do I do now?' he asked, a trifle confused.

Packer chuckled delightedly. 'I suggest you get back into the car and put your foot down a little bit,' he said. 'You now have just 35 minutes to get back to London. If we do not both arrive safely before that time is up, my colleagues execute your dear lady friend without a single second's delay.'

Steed ran for the car, suddenly realising why Packer no longer needed to rely quite so heavily upon his gun. Screaming round in a tight U-turn, he gunned the Bentley back through the winding country road towards the outskirts of North London.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Spelman grinned happily as the telephone sounded five times and then faded into silence. He turned towards Purdey. 'Well, that's it,' he crowed. 'We're home and dry. Steed is on his way with the papers, and it's almost over.'

Purdey sniffed in disgust. 'You still think Steed would be rash enough to bring those attack plans, don't you? I think you're in for something of a rude awakening, Spelman.'

To her surprise, Spelman burst into laughter. 'Oh, you're quite right, Purdey,' he agreed with her. 'I would personally be very surprised indeed if Steed did bring the genuine Allied Attack Plans with him. I have no doubt that he will have tricked up something fake, but convincing enough to appear genuine.'

Purdey gaped at him open-mouthed. 'It doesn't seem to worry you. Then why all this charade?' she asked, when curiosity overcame her initial shock.

Spelman grinned expansively. 'I don't give a damn about the Allied Attack Plans,' he informed her. 'I could probably have taken them myself with very little trouble. They'll be out of date in a couple of weeks, anyway. They have very little value.'

'Then why?' Purdey was completely baffled.

'Doubt,' Spelman said, with heavy emphasis. 'Doubt is one of the most deadly and efficient weapons in the world, if it's used cleverly. And I intend to be very clever indeed.'

'I like a modest man,' Purdey muttered. 'Do go on.'

Spelman ignored the insult. He was too full of himself to take much notice. 'Just imagine,' he went on. 'Just try

to imagine what is going to happen when Steed is incriminated as a traitor. It will rock the entire Department . . . make it almost ineffectual for perhaps years. Steed turned traitor? It will pull the rug out from underneath everyone's feet. If Steed can turn rogue, then there's absolutely no-one left to trust. Everyone will be doubting everyone else . . . it will be like an acid, eroding, destroying, eating away at the very fabric of national security.'

Purdey scoffed. 'It will never work.'

'Oh, but it will,' Spelman assured her. 'It will work perfectly. There will be a top-secret enquiry, of course. McKay will do his damndest to keep the whole affair under wraps. But I'll be there as well, you see . . . to make sure that a discreet leak in the right place starts a full-scale national scandal. Tom McKay is like Steed . . . a gentleman of the old school. Honour and duty, integrity before personal pride and all that old rubbish. He will have no choice but to do the gentlemanly thing and tender his resignation. With Steed gone, McKay gone . . . there is only one man in the entire department qualified for promotion up to departmental head.'

'You, of course?' Purdey asked, cynically.

Spelman laughed. 'Now you're getting smarter,' he said. 'I get to be in sole charge of the Department, at a time when morale is practically non-existent, security is at an all-time low, and there is a sudden shortage of top-level field agents. It will be up to me to choose the candidates to fill those vacancies.'

'Jobs for the boys, eh?' Purdey said, in a newly-chastened voice. Spelman's plan was simple enough, but it could be devastatingly effective. In a matter of a few months, the entire British Intelligence Service could be riddled with foreign agents, all in top positions of authority. It was a frightening thought.

'Steed will never get a chance to clear his name, of

course,' she continued, her voice betraying the sinking feeling which Spelman's words had started up.

The man shook his head, still smiling. 'Of course not. Clive Walters is dead . . . supposedly murdered by Steed. He is already a marked man. The word is out . . . stop John Steed on sight, at any cost, and in any way possible. I shall have the honour of fulfilling that particular little task for the Department. After he has killed you, that is. Tragically, I shall arrive just too late to save you. Justifiably, I will make no serious attempt to take Steed alive.' Spelman broke off to chuckle. 'I shall be something of a hero, as it happens.'

'You're forgetting Gambit,' Purdey pointed out. 'He would never believe that Steed could be a traitor. He's even less likely to accept that Steed would harm me for a second. He won't rest until he has dug to the bottom of the whole stinking business. He'll stop you, Spelman. You can count on that.'

Spelman shook his head. 'No. Gambit doesn't like me...'

'I wonder why?' Purdey interrupted.

'... But he has no reason to distrust me,' Spelman continued, oblivious to Purdey's insults. 'I can make life very unpleasant for him in the coming months . . . keep him busy on boring, soul-destroying missions which will leave him precious little time in which to conduct any private investigations. Your poor friend Gambit won't like that at all. He's not the kind of man who can survive for long under conditions like that. He's a free agent, a man who likes room to manoeuvre and play things at his own time and speed. He won't be able to take the kind of pressures I will be capable of piling upon him. Eventually, he'll crack, or try to fight back. He'll rebel . . . and then I shall have him. If he doesn't resign out of sheer frustration, I will be able to drum him out of the Service with dishonour.'

'Gambit is smarter than you think,' Purdey said defiantly. 'He'll see through you, Spelman . . . and you won't know what's hit you.'

Spelman smiled patronisingly. 'You're clutching at straws, my dear Purdey. Only a couple of days ago you had complete and utter faith in Steed. Now, as you see, he has done exactly what I wanted and expected him to do. You're making a sad mistake trying to transfer that same misplaced faith on to Gambit's shoulders, I assure you.' Spelman paused to shrug carelessly. 'Anyway, even if Gambit did get a little tricky, I have a dozen other alternatives . . . every one of them devastatingly effective and totally permanent. We are in a dangerous occupation. There are losses, fatalities. Even the most well-trained agent can make a mistake, one that costs him his life. An unfortunate accident would not be too difficult to arrange. It might even be the best alternative, come to think of it. Another vacancy to fill . . . another link in the chain of sabotage.'

'You think you really have it all worked out, don't you?' Purdey said bitterly.

Spelman glowed with pride. 'Yes, I think so,' he replied, brightly. 'I have a reputation for being meticulous and thorough. That's one of the things which will help to assure my promotion.'

'You also have a great deal of arrogance,' Purdey said scathingly. 'And that might also assure your fall.'

'No,' Spelman said firmly, grinning and shaking his head. He refused to be brought down. 'There's virtually nothing which can go wrong with my plans now. At this very minute, Steed is walking blindly into a perfect trap . . . and there's not a damned thing anyone can do to stop him.' He glanced down at his watch. 'It will all be over in less than an hour from now, Purdey. A nice, quick ending to fifteen years of hard work.'

CHAPTER TWENTY

Gambit groaned loudly, and tried to shake himself back to full consciousness. Painfully, he managed to sit up, then drag himself up the leg of Steed's bureau into a standing position. His legs felt like jelly beneath him, and there was a searing pain in his groin and belly. Awkwardly, he hobbled round the desk and snatched up the telephone, starting to dial McKay's office number.

On the fourth digit, he stopped, suddenly. Steed's voice echoed faintly in the recesses of his mind. 'It's Purdey . . . she's been kidnapped and that envelope is the price of her life . . .'

On a sudden impulse, Gambit slammed the receiver back into its cradle and ran his eyes over the surface of Steed's desk. He finally found what he was looking for. Opening Steed's personal diary, he began to flip through long lists of private telephone numbers.

He found the one he was looking for. Picking up the telephone again, Gambit began to dial.

It seemed to ring for an infuriatingly long time before a woman answered. 'Hello?' came a soft, somewhat husky voice.

'I'd like to speak to Purdey, if it's convenient,' Gambit said politely.

There was a brief pause. 'Purdey?' the woman asked, her voice a little uncertain.

'That is her mother speaking, isn't it?' Gambit queried. There was a nasty fluttering feeling starting up in his stomach . . . and it wasn't just the after-effects of Steed's blow.

'Yes, this is Purdey's mother . . . but I'm afraid she

isn't here at the moment. She was coming to stay with me for a few days, but something cropped up unexpectedly. She sent me a telegram saying that she wouldn't be able to make it.'

'Oh,' Gambit felt the fluttering stepping up a couple of gears into a full-scale tremor. 'I'm sorry to have bothered you. Do give her my regards when you see her.'

He hung up without giving his name or attempting to leave any message. Lifting the phone again quickly, he dialled Tom McKay. 'McKay? It's Gambit.'

'Ah, Gambit . . . where are you?' McKay wanted to know.

'I'm at Steed's place,' Gambit answered. 'I think we have some serious trouble.'

'Steed's place . . . did you get him?' McKay demanded.

Gambit grunted. 'No, as a matter of fact, he got me,' he said ruefully.

McKay snorted with displeasure. 'But dammit, man . . . you were armed, prepared. What went wrong?'

'I was me . . . and he was Steed,' Gambit muttered. 'But listen, McKay, there may not be much time for holding autopsies. I have every reason to believe that Purdey has been abducted. I think she might be in some considerable danger. How it ties up with Steed, I'm not sure at the moment, but there is a definite link. This whole business seems to revolve around Purdey.'

'You'd better come straight in to base,' McKay snapped. 'Bring anything you have with you. I'll initiate a full enquiry at once.'

'No,' Gambit shouted the single word. 'I don't think there is time for that. I need some answers, McKay . . . and I need them fast. For instance, who else besides Steed knew about the Allied Attack Plans?'

There was a long pause.

'Well?' Gambit prompted.

'You're treading on dangerous ground, Gambit,' McKay said in a suddenly sombre voice. 'This is absolutely priority material. You can't seriously expect me to talk about it over a public telephone line.'

'Please. It's important,' Gambit pleaded. 'Believe me, I'm convinced that both Steed's and Purdey's lives are at stake.'

There was another long pause before McKay answered. 'Clive Walters,' he murmured quietly at last. 'He knew of the plans.'

'Wrong. Walters is dead,' Gambit snapped. 'Try again, McKay. There has to be someone else inside the Department who fits into this little jigsaw puzzle.'

'Well, Spelman, of course,' McKay admitted after a few seconds of thought. 'He would have to know about the plans, in his capacity as chief liaison officer.'

'And that's it?' Gambit asked. He needed to be sure.

'Yes, I'm certain of it,' McKay confirmed. 'Steed . . . Walters, and Spelman. Those were the only three people, besides myself of course, who could have known anything about the Allied Attack Plans.'

'All right. Now please listen carefully,' Gambit said in a cool, but firm tone. 'Get hold of Spelman at once. Make any excuse . . . but get him into your office and keep him there until I arrive. Will you do that for me?'

'What's all this leading up to?' McKay asked, in a puzzled voice.

'There's no time,' Gambit repeated, exasperation lending a sharp edge to his voice. 'Will you please just do as I ask? I need your help, and I need your trust, McKay.'

There was a short silence. 'I'm sorry, Gambit, I can't do it,' McKay said apologetically. 'Spelman isn't here. He left about an hour ago.'

'Damn!' Gambit swore vehemently. 'Where does he live? Can you tell me that?'

'North London somewhere . . . a chi-chi sort of place. I believe he has a penthouse flat over a converted warehouse . . . used to be a storehouse for some clothing company.'

'Can you get the address?' Gambit snapped.

'Well, yes, I can look it up in the files,' McKay admitted. 'It would only take a moment or two.'

'Make it one,' Gambit said. He waited patiently.

'Ah, here you are,' McKay said, picking up the phone again after about half a minute. He read out the address carefully. 'Have you got that?'

'Check,' Gambit muttered. He had scribbled the address down on Steed's desk-top. 'I'll call in as soon as I have any definite news.'

He began to hang up. A second or so before he dropped the receiver, Gambit heard McKay's voice, shouting. Gambit whipped the telephone up to his ear once again. 'Is there something else . . . an afterthought?' he asked.

McKay gave a nervous, awkward cough. 'There is something else I think you should know about,' he said in an unusually apologetic voice. 'It has to do with our little discussion this morning.'

'Well?' Gambit urged.

'I said I would give you until the evening, on your own,' McKay went on. 'After that, I would have no option but to put out a general alert on Steed.'

'Yes?' Gambit breathed, already suspecting what McKay was going to say.

'Well, I issued that alert a short while before Spelman left here,' McKay said, flatly. 'I'm sorry, Gambit . . . but if Spelman is out there looking for Steed, he has the same orders as I gave you . . . to stop Steed in any way possible. He has an official carte-blanche to shoot him on sight, without warning.'

Gambit received the information with a philosophical

sigh. It had been expected. 'Let's just hope I can get to either or both of them in time, then,' he muttered down the telephone. 'Otherwise, you may well have given out Steed's death-warrant.'

He dropped the receiver and began scouring Steed's drawing room for his missing gun. From the way things appeared to be shaping, he was going to need it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Vernon stared out through the window as the faint purring of Steed's approaching Bentley came to his ears. He watched the car roll to a halt below, keeping a keen eye on Steed, as he climbed out of the car at Packer's bidding. Only when the two men had passed below his line of vision towards the doorway did Vernon turn away from the window. 'They're here,' he announced excitedly. 'It looks as though Steed is behaving himself perfectly.'

Spelman allowed himself a thin smile. 'Yes, well I think we ought to check our guns, anyway. Steed will have at least one little trick up his sleeve, if I know the man at all.'

He and Vernon carefully checked over their automatics. Marvin merely leaned against the wall beside the door, grinning amiably. He could never understand the need for firearms.

They waited as they heard the faint sounds of the door closing, and the first of Steed's footsteps on the wooden stairs. Spelman glanced over towards Purdey, quickly moving towards her as she tensed in her chair.

She opened her mouth to scream out a warning. Quick as a flash, Spelman snatched up a small red apple from a nearby fruit bowl and popped it neatly into her mouth. Moving around behind her, he grabbed her arms and

thrust them behind her back. Effectively gagged, Purdey could only make faint spluttering sounds as Steed was ushered into the room at the point of Packer's Luger.

Steed strolled in nonchalantly, lifting his finger and thumb to the rim of his bowler and doffing it politely. 'Good evening, gentlemen,' he said, cheerily. He walked over to Purdey, regarding her with a warm smile. 'Last time I saw anything like this, it was at the Savoy Grill . . . and quite delicious.' He gently removed the apple from between her teeth. 'Are you all right?'

Purdey nodded. 'Steed, it's a trap,' she blurted out.

Steed nodded calmly. 'Oh, of course,' he murmured. 'I fully expected that it would be.' He looked up at Spelman, still smiling in a carefree, friendly manner. 'Hello, Spelman.'

Spelman dropped Purdey's arms, regarding Steed quizzically. 'You don't seem surprised,' he said quietly.

Steed shook his head. 'I'm not,' he said bluntly. 'I rather had you figured out as the rotten apple in the barrel all along. It had to be someone inside the Department, to know my intimate movements and habits with such uncanny accuracy.' He nodded to Spelman's accomplices. 'Well, aren't you going to introduce your colleagues?'

Spelman stepped out from behind Purdey's chair, his gun held firmly in his hand. 'All right, Steed . . . we can cut out the pretences,' he snapped testily. 'Did you bring the plans?'

Steed nodded, very slowly and gently drawing back the lapel of his jacket so that Spelman could see the envelope nestling in his inside breast pocket. Spelman reached forward and snatched it out, withdrawing to a table across the room. Checking that Steed was well covered by Vernon's gun, he laid his own weapon down on the table and prepared to rip open the envelope.

'Don't open it . . . he rigged some sort of an incendiary

device,' Packer shouted out. 'Tear open that top flap and the whole package goes up in flames.'

Spelman stopped, replacing the envelope gingerly on to the table top.

'You can feel it,' Packer volunteered.

Spelman ran the tips of his fingers over the envelope, locating the small package by the flap. He paused thoughtfully, finally whipping the envelope up again and brandishing it in the air. 'An incendiary, eh?' he mused.

Steed confronted him with a blank stare. 'I can defuse it, of course,' he said quietly. 'But it will take me about thirty minutes or so to do it, I'm afraid.'

Spelman regarded him with a piercing gaze. 'I think you're bluffing,' he said after a while. 'Simple delaying tactics . . . playing for a little bit of time.'

Steed's bland expression did not change, or waver for a second. 'If you think it's a bluff . . . then call it,' he challenged. 'The only thing you have to lose is the plans . . . and possibly two or three fingers of your right hand.'

There was a long period of silence. Finally, Spelman's eyes glinted wickedly. 'I think I will call your bluff, Steed. After all, the plans are of no importance anyway.' He tightened his thumb and forefinger on the top of the envelope, tensing slightly as he prepared to rip it open.

Packer, Marvin and Vernon sucked in their breath expectantly, waiting for a sudden flash and explosion.

Spelman suddenly laughed loudly. 'But the plans are one thing . . . my fingers are another,' he announced. He walked over towards Purdey, thrusting the envelope towards her. 'Therefore, *you* shall open it, my dear Purdey.'

She looked up at him scathingly. 'You've got to be joking, of course?'

'Far from it,' Spelman said with a shake of his head. He dropped the envelope into her lap and recrossed to

the table to pick up his gun. He held it at arm's length, the muzzle lined up on Steed's shoulder. 'You have ten seconds to open that envelope,' he muttered over his shoulder to Purdey. 'If you don't, I shall take Steed limb by limb.' He began counting, slowly. 'One, two, three . . .'

On the count of seven, Purdey picked up the envelope with trembling hands, holding it out at arm's length. She glanced across at Steed's impassive face for some sort of clue. As Spelman turned, briefly towards Purdey on the count of nine, Steed winked.

Purdey ripped the end of the envelope off in one swift, clean movement. Across the room, Packer gasped briefly, tensing himself for a shock.

Nothing happened. Purdey relaxed, shivering slightly and extending the open envelope towards Spelman. He walked over briskly, grinning broadly, and snatched it from her fingers.

He walked to the table, upending the envelope. A half-empty book of matches tumbled out on to the table-top. 'So I was right . . . it was a bluff,' Spelman chortled. He shook the remaining contents of the envelope out, giving the photographs only a cursory glance. 'Well, you certainly delivered the goods, Steed,' he muttered. 'I must admit, you surprise me. I fully expected you to attempt some kind of fakery. Thought you would have some trick or other.'

'Perhaps I still have,' Steed murmured quietly. He smiled tauntingly at Spelman. 'For all you know, I may well be keeping a little surprise under my hat.'

Spelman regarded Steed through narrowed eyes, as a faint suggestion of a frown crossed his brow. Steed worried him slightly. There was something about the man's manner which did not quite fit, although Spelman could not quite pin it down and analyse it. Steed seemed too cool, too confident. He should have been on the

defensive, but he was not. Steed showed every symptom of a man with a hidden ace up his sleeve.

'Yes, you certainly do seem to be in a remarkably calm frame of mind, for a man in your circumstances,' Spelman murmured reflectively. 'But then again, that too could be a bluff. I know you well enough to know that you will appear cool under almost any conditions . . . just to gain some slight psychological advantage. I wonder . . . just what little game *are* you playing, Steed?'

Steed smiled infuriatingly. 'You were right, of course,' he muttered quietly. 'I *was* playing for time, with that story about the incendiary device. But not much time, Spelman. I didn't need much time.' Steed broke off to glance down at his watch, nodding with satisfaction. 'Yes, I should think they would have this place well and truly surrounded by now.'

'Surrounded?' Spelman's eyes flashed with sudden doubt. 'What are you talking about, Steed?'

'You really didn't imagine I would walk into this alone, did you?' Steed asked. 'You should know me better than that, Spelman. I'm a far too cautious man to do anything so foolhardy. Oh no, McKay's boys were with me every inch of the way. They have been since I first suspected you.'

Spelman gave this little speech a few moments of careful thought. At last, he barked an order across to Marvin. 'Switch out the main light.'

Marvin moved along the wall and flipped the switch. The room was lit only by a small lamp in the corner. Beyond that small pool of light, the vast area of the warehouse stretched away into pitch blackness.

Packer moved towards Spelman. 'We weren't followed. Steed is bluffing again. I made a special point of stopping to check. If there had been anyone tailing us, I would have seen them.'

'Are you positive?' Spelman demanded.

'Absolutely,' Packer replied firmly. 'I'd stake my life on it.'

'You may have to,' Spelman murmured coldly. 'Go and take a look around outside . . . check the surrounding area out as thoroughly as you can. Stay on your toes.'

Packer shrugged carelessly. 'If you insist . . . but I'm telling you, no-one could have followed me. I was too careful.'

Spelman snorted angrily. 'You can never be *too* careful . . . especially when you're dealing with a man like Steed.'

As Packer moved towards the exit, Steed spoke again. His voice was slightly mocking, totally authoritative. 'Of course he won't *see* anybody outside, Spelman. You of all people ought to know that McKay's best boys are far too well trained for that. No, the first clue you'll have to their presence is when they start shooting. And with crack shots, you won't know much about that, either.'

Spelman ignored him. He crept along the wall to peer out of the window. Below, he saw Packer come out and crouch behind Steed's car, peering furtively out into the darkness.'

'That's a bit silly, Spelman,' Steed called out to him. 'Standing by the window like that. They'll have their guns trained on you as a primary target. Yes, they'll take you first, Spelman. They'll shoot you before they bother about your henchmen.'

Spelman moved back into cover, waiting. There was a long period of silence. Finally, from outside, Packer called up to the window. 'There's nobody out here. Steed was lying again.'

Spelman relaxed. He stared across at Steed with a twisted smile on his face. 'You really are a tiresome man, Steed. Well, I've finally taken enough from you. That was your last piece of bluff, I'm afraid.'

He moved across the room, levelling his automatic at Steed's head.

Steed faced him with a calm, level stare and a smile. 'Pull that trigger and you're a dead man, Spelman,' he countered. 'Of course there's no-one outside . . . not any more. They've had plenty of time to get into the building by now. They're already inside . . . ready to gun you down at any moment.'

Steed began to move, slowly, towards Purdey, with Spelman's gun following him every inch of the way. 'Friend Packer hasn't returned yet, you'll notice,' Steed muttered. 'They probably grabbed him on the stairs. That's one less on your side.'

Despite himself, Spelman snapped a terse order across to Vernon. 'Check the staircase.'

As Vernon moved to the door, pressing himself against the wall, Spelman turned, briefly back to the window to look for Packer.

It was the tiny diversion which Steed had been fishing for. His hand flashed up under the rim of his bowler, his finger and thumb closing around the small package he had carefully taped into position. With a sharp tug, he tore the two jumping jacks free. The match-head bound to their fuses scraped free of the sandpaper housing, spluttering into life.

Steed's arm flashed downwards, the rush of air extinguishing the flaring match a split second after it had served its purpose in igniting the shortened touchpaper. With a deft flick of the wrist, Steed sent the fireworks spinning away into the darkness of the warehouse.

Spelman turned back from the window, bringing up his gun again. His finger tightened on the trigger.

The first jumping jack cracked loudly in the silence. Spelman, reacting with all the lightning reflexes of his training, whirled towards the flash of light, dropping to his

knees and rolling towards the nearest cover.

Steed moved with equal speed. He threw himself forward, grabbing the table by one leg and pulling it over on to its side, dragging it across the floor to form a screen around himself and Purdey.

While Spelman and Vernon blasted off a volley of shots towards the harmless firecrackers, Steed whipped off his bowler, sliding back a hidden inner compartment and tipping a tiny automatic out into his palm.

Purdey laughed nervously, sensing a slim chance of salvation for the first time in days. 'My God, Steed . . . you really do keep your surprises under your hat, don't you?'

Steed made no reply. He slid the tiny gun into a businesslike grip and peered over the top edge of the table.

A little late, Spelman and Vernon had realised how they had been tricked. The continuing flashes and explosions from the jumping jacks no longer distracted them. Their eyes were totally concentrated on Steed and Purdey.

Three bullets smacked into the heavy table, mere inches from Steed's head. He ducked down again quickly, snapping off one quick shot into the darkness just to let Spelman know he was armed.

Purdey nudged him, whispering furtively. 'You might just be able to make it to the door, Steed. Make a run for it.'

Steed looked at her with a shocked expression. 'And desert a lady in distress? My scoutmaster would turn in his grave.'

He rolled away from her, taking quick aim on a shadowy figure by the far wall and squeezing off a single shot. There was the rewarding, solid sound of a hit, and the figure reeled backwards to crash on to the floor.

'Ah . . . a pity,' Steed murmured under his breath, as

one of the store dummies rolled into the light of the lamp. Two bullets thudded into the floor beside him as he rolled back behind cover of the table.

The gunplay ceased for a while. Spelman called across to his colleagues. 'Vernon . . . get around behind them. We can flank them easily enough.'

Above his voice, Steed heard the pounding of feet upon the stairs as Packer dashed up, responding to the unexpected noise of gunfire. He tensed himself, shifting his weight on to his toes, still crouched behind the table.

The door at the top of the stairs burst open. At the first sound, Steed sprang to his feet, his timing absolutely perfect. He fired off two rapid shots as Packer entered the room, a perfect target framed in the doorway. There was a brief scream of pain, the clatter of a gun dropping to the floor, then the heavy sound of a body crashing back down the stairs.

'One down,' Steed murmured.

'Well down, I should say,' Purdey observed, as Packer's body made its last thud and silence reigned again.

A faint slither of movement alerted Steed. His keen ears pricked, quickly identifying the direction of the sound. He threw himself over Purdey's prone body, transferring the small gun to his left hand. Reaching out around the left-hand side of the table, he squeezed the trigger.

Nothing happened. Steed tightened his grip, but the trigger mechanism was jammed solid. He jerked his arm back quickly, squinting down at the useless firearm. Working feverishly, he unclipped the magazine, trying to work the mechanism free again.

'Jammed?' Purdey whispered.

Steed nodded. 'Like us,' he shot back. He slammed the clip back into position again and tested the trigger. It was still hopelessly locked up. The gun was finished.

Across the room, Spelman seemed to sense that Steed was in trouble. He called across to Vernon. 'Cover me . . . I'm going to flank round on their left side.'

Steed raised his head slightly, peering over the table edge as Spelman broke from cover, beginning to skirt around the side wall towards them.

In a last, desperate gesture, Steed hurled the automatic at Spelman's head. It bounced, harmlessly off the man's right shoulder, evoking no more than a faint grunt of surprise, more than pain.

Spelman stopped in his tracks, slowly straightening to a standing position. He had no further need to keep his body shielded. 'We've got them,' he crowed exultantly. 'They're sitting ducks. Move in and finish them off . . . that's what we brought them here for.'

On Steed's right, Vernon stepped out from behind a row of display cases, beginning to move towards the table. He stepped past the open door by the stairs.

. . . And promptly disappeared as though the Earth had opened to swallow him up!

Spelman shouted across, in sudden alarm. 'Vernon?'

There was no reply. Just the sound of a brief scuffle, the sharp crack of a deadly karate blow being delivered . . . and then silence.

Spelman called again. 'Vernon . . . are you all right?'

There came a non-committal grunt. Vernon re-appeared in the doorway, standing strangely lifeless, like one of the dummies.

'What's happening?' Purdey whispered.

Steed grinned broadly. 'Unless I'm much mistaken . . . the Third Cavalry just rode over the brow of the hill,' he murmured cryptically. He peered out round the edge of the table, straining his eyes to the gloomy doorway.

Vernon was not standing. He was being held up as a

shield by Gambit, who was slowly beginning to inch through the doorway into the room.

Spelman saw him as well. He crouched, squeezing off two quick shots in succession. Vernon's body jerked like a puppet on broken strings as the heavy slugs chewed into his chest.

Gambit thrust the dead man away from him, rolling sideways across the floor and firing at Spelman as he did so.

The heavy Service Webley packed a kick like a mule. Gambit's third bullet took Spelman in the shoulder, spinning him around and backwards towards the window. He crashed through it, his knees buckling against the low sill. Almost in slow motion, accompanied by the crash of breaking glass, Spelman toppled over, to perform a half-somersault before plummeting to the ground below. There was a short, strangled scream, followed by the sound of a heavy fall.

'I sincerely hope he didn't land on my car,' Steed said, fervently. He glanced aside at Gambit, who had now rolled behind the table to join them. 'Left things a bit fine, didn't you?'

Gambit grinned ruefully. 'Next time you need me in a hurry, don't hit me so hard,' he countered. 'By the way, are we home and dry yet?'

'One to go,' Purdey put in. 'A rather large ape called Marvin. As far as I know, he's not armed.'

'Ah, that's all right then.' Gambit scrambled to his feet, gun in hand. Squinting into the dark, he began to move into the centre of the room.

Steed and Purdey also stood, dusting themselves down.

A loud bellow of rage, strangely similar to that of an injured bull elephant, echoed out across the warehouse. From out of the darkness, Marvin's huge body lumbered into view, travelling at surprising speed for so much bulk.

Gambit could have used his gun, but he was English to

the core, having a soft spot for dumb animals. He tensed himself as Marvin charged towards him, head-down like a human battering ram.

Marvin's rock-like head slammed into Gambit's chest, lifting him a good six inches clear of the ground. Completely winded, Gambit let out a horrible grunt. His arms flew sideways, the gun sailing out of his fingers to slide across the floor into a corner.

'Oh dear,' Purdey murmured. It certainly looked as though Gambit had been finished by that first assault. She stared anxiously at Gambit's broad back as he staggered on his heels, almost ready to fall over.

He fell back a few feet, pulling himself together with a painful effort. Marvin shambled in towards him, his ham-like fists flailing in the air like demented windmill sails.

Gambit side-stepped neatly, poising himself on his toes. Choosing his moment carefully, he threw his entire body weight into a solid punch aimed at the big man's chin.

The blow had little or no effect, other than to halt Marvin in his tracks for a second or so. He absorbed the full force of the punch, shaking his head briefly like a horse flicking away a fly with its tail.

Then, with another bellow of anger, he moved in towards Gambit once again, swinging a wild, hooking fist to the side of his head.

Gambit grabbed at his wrist, trying to turn the swing to his own advantage. He failed, miserably. Once again, his feet left the ground as Marvin lifted him as though he were a sack of feathers. Thrown off balance, Gambit tumbled heavily on to his back.

Marvin shuffled in for the kill, delivering a vicious kick at Gambit's kidneys. Gambit rolled just enough to ride the blow, but the point of Marvin's boot caught him on the hip, evoking another grunt of pain.

Steed broke across the room, running to the wall and flipping on the main light switch. 'This I want to see,' he muttered, returning to Purdey's side.

She winced as Marvin slammed a bone-breaking punch into Gambit's solar plexus, putting him down on to the floor for the third time. Anxiously, she glanced up at Steed. 'Well . . . aren't you going to help him?'

Steed shook his head. 'I don't think I ought to. Poor old Gambit needs a chance to get his confidence back. I think I might have rather bruised his pride.'

Marvin had wrapped his arms around Gambit's chest in a bear-hug. Purdey could almost hear the sound of ribs creaking with strain. 'Good God, Steed . . . that gorilla is going to slaughter him,' she screamed in panic.

'No, Gambit can beat him,' Steed murmured with quiet confidence. 'I think he could beat anybody . . . well, almost anybody.'

Still highly dubious, Purdey looked back at the two combatants, expecting Gambit's ribcage to split like a rotten walnut at any second. Her pretty features were contorted as she shared his agony.

Gambit lashed backwards with the heel of his shoe at Marvin's shin. With a grunt of pain, the huge man limped backwards, releasing the bear hug. Spinning on the ball of one foot, Gambit jerked his elbow into Marvin's side, following through with a savage chop immediately below the heart.

As the big man staggered back a few inches, Gambit danced away from him, taking an opportunity to get back his breath.

Still undeterred, Marvin put his head down again and lumbered forward for another body charge. Gambit stood, squarely, facing him as he closed in. Purdey groaned. It looked as though Gambit was going to take it head-on again.

Suddenly, at the very last moment, Gambit lifted his leg. With a whip-like crack, his foot lashed out, connecting solidly with Marvin's chin. With a neat side-step, Gambit moved clear as the massive man continued past him, stumbling across the room until he crashed, headfirst into the wall.

It was all over. Marvin seemed to turn into a mountain of shapeless jelly, slithering down the wall to collapse in a heap on the floor.

Gambit straightened, drawing in a deep breath. Grinning weakly towards Steed and Purdey, he shuffled across to Marvin's unconscious form and prodded it with his foot. The man was out for the count.

Gambit turned back to Steed. 'Thanks for your help,' he managed to say sarcastically, between gasps for breath.

'You didn't need it, Steed said simply. He walked across the room to Vernon's body, bending over it and going through his pockets. He fished out a small key, then strolled back to Purdey, unlocking the fetter around her neck.

'Well, that would appear to be about it,' he said simply. 'Nothing else to do except get the explanations ready.'

Gambit grunted. 'You're certainly going to have to do a lot of that,' he put in. His eyes fell upon the envelope which had held the plans. Stooping to the floor, Gambit picked it up, carrying it across to Purdey. 'Let's have a little peek at what your life was worth,' he muttered.

Steed made a couple of hasty steps towards him. 'Er, Gambit . . . there's no need to bother with that,' he said awkwardly, but it was too late. Gambit had already tipped the photographs out into his palm.

He stared at them in amazement for a few seconds, finally looking up at Steed. 'These are the genuine article,'

he breathed, in a choked tone. 'These really are the Allied Attack Plans.'

Steed grinned sheepishly. 'Yes, well . . . I wasn't quite sure what they had in mind,' he said, rather lamely.

Gambit began to grin, triumphantly. 'My God, Steed . . . I've finally caught you out. "Break all the rules . . . but never *that* rule." You're an old charlatan, Steed . . . exposed at last.'

Steed was lost for words. He stared hopelessly at Gambit, fearing the look of accusations which might break out upon his face at any second.

Instead, Gambit only grinned. He reached into his pocket, extracting a cigarette lighter and snapping it into flame. When the pile of photographs were well and truly ablaze, he dropped them to the floor.

There was no need for words. The gesture said everything.

Purdey glanced, briefly at the ashes, then ran to Steed's side. There were tears in her eyes as she wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her face against his. 'Oh, Steed . . . you'd do that . . . for me.'

Steed shrugged, a little embarrassed. 'Well, they're only papers. But *you* . . . you're Purdey.' He squeezed her fondly. 'There is a little favour you could do for me, if you're feeling that grateful.'

'Anything Steed,' Purdey promised. 'You know you only have to ask.'

'Well.' Steed shifted his feet nervously. 'I would be greatly obliged if you could have a little word with Suzy Pilkington for me . . . help to square things between us. You see, she has this idea that I am inordinately fond of you.'

Gambit stood back, regarding them both as they continued to embrace. 'Poor deluded woman,' he mur-

mured sarcastically. 'I wonder what on earth could have given her that impression?'

Purdey and Steed looked across at him, frowning slightly.

Gambit grinned, moving slowly towards them and throwing his arm around Purdey's free shoulder. She began to giggle, quietly.

HOSTAGE

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